

HOSMAN, SARAH SILTANEN, M.A. Muslim Punk Rock in the United States: A Social History of the Taqwacores. (2009)
Directed by Dr. Rebecca G. Adams. 124 pp.

This project develops a social history of a Muslim American punk rock subculture, The Taqwacores. This social history examines the social context in the United States that has facilitated the emergence of Taqwacore, specifically the cultural, political, and social influences in the lives of Taqwacore members. This social history also examines how individuals explain and understand their involvement with Taqwacore and their combination of these two seemingly paradoxical identities. Methods include an analysis of publications about The Taqwacores to understand how the media conceptualize Taqwacore and interviews with musicians and fans in order to understand Taqwacore on an individual level, explore the personal experiences of specific Muslim Americans with Taqwacore, and determine specific motivating factors for involvement in Taqwacore. Drawing on subcultural theory, theories of punk rock, and recent studies of Islamic identity in United States, Taqwacore is conceptualized as an expression of a dual frustration toward the United States and Islam for the individuals involved. Taqwacore also serves as a form of resistance to this dual frustration, a community for those involved, a re-appropriation of punk rock within the United States, and a source of both individual and collective identity construction.

MUSLIM PUNK ROCK IN THE UNITED STATES: A SOCIAL
HISTORY OF THE TAQWACORES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2009

Approved by

Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There's no word for me but taqwa to call what beamed from his empyreal profile: the hair reaching for heaven, black leather vest crowded with spikes reflecting the sun, guitar dangling freely on its strap as he let go. I just looked at him, my body charged with a kind of holy nervousness...

The Taqwacores (p. 13)

Michael Muhammad Knight's novel, *The Taqwacores*, is a story about a young Muslim American man living in a punk house in New York. He is surrounded by a variety of individuals, from a hardcore straightedge Sunni, to a burqa-clad riotgrrrl, and a Shi'a skinhead. Maneuvering through college life, the main character questions Islam, what it means to be a Muslim in America, and how Muslim punk rock can exist in the United States.

Knight began by photocopying and hand-distributing copies of *The Taqwacores*, and by 2004, the novel received international publication. Shortly after publication, several of the bands in the book came to life as Muslim youth from across America formed Taqwacore bands. During the summer of 2007, the Taqwa-Tour traveled across The United States playing shows, featuring bands such as Al-Thawra, Diacritical, The Kominas, Secret Trial Five, and Vote Hezbollah. Omar Majeed began filming a documentary about the Taqwacores during the tour that will be released in the summer of 2009. Most recently, in 2008, a movie based on the book *The Taqwacores* was filmed

(starring many of the real-life bands as their fictional counterparts) and will be released in 2009.

How did punk rock and Islam come together in real life? Specifically, how did these two seemingly incongruous identities or cultures merge within the American context? Both punk rock and Muslim lifestyles have specific requirements that not only seem incompatible, but each is also an encompassing identity, requiring devotion and authenticity. Punk rock, as a subculture and musical style actively resists mainstream society and questions traditional or accepted norms and values. Characterized by a do-it-yourself ethic, punk rock blurs traditional boundaries between audience and performer (Davies, 2005; Moore, 2007). Punk rock often disengages from mainstream society and embraces a marginalized identity and role in society (Traber, 2001). In embracing “the Other,” punk rockers often elicit shock from others through their style and attitude and by incorporating discourses into their music that had previously been absent from popular music, such as sex, violence, and obscenity (Laing, 1985). It is worth noting here that the punk subculture (especially in the United States) has primarily been a subculture dominated by white young men (Leblanc, 2002; Ramírez-Sánchez, 2008; Traber, 2001), illustrated also through the academic studies of punk subcultures that have primarily focused on men within punk rock (e.g., Baron, 1989; Moore, 2007).

In stark contrast, Islam is a religion founded on a deeply personal and individual belief in God and is characterized by selflessness, devotion, and responsibility. Islam is a

structured religion, illustrated by the five daily prayers, focused on a constant consciousness of God and God's will, an engagement and practice of one's faith, a respect for cleanliness and piety, and a devout sense of social responsibility (e.g., all Muslims, if they are financially able, are required to pay an annual *zakat* or religious tax that supports the disadvantaged of society; Esposito, 2005). Both punk rock and Islam, however, put faith in or embrace their own rules and traditions as opposed to "worldly" or mainstream culture. A prioritization of one's own culture above the mainstream is an interesting parallel between the two.

While punk rock has historically been a subculture that thrived in the United States and The United Kingdom, recently scholars have explored punk and heavy metal subcultures in various contexts, including non-Western countries. O'Connor (2002, 2003) has written comparatively about the punk subcultures in Mexico, Canada, and in the United States. O'Connor (2002) perceives a "cultural flow" across cities that brought punk rock music and style to these specific locations, but was socially organized by the creation of a local scene. The subcultures or scenes that develop are shaped by the local social geography as well as culturally fluid concepts. In examining the political involvement of punks in Mexico, O'Connor (2003) discussed the synthesis of the global and the local, as punks he observed used a local stage or setting to express political and social beliefs about global events.

Further, Feixa (2006) examined this link between global cultures and local resistance by comparing local punk scenes in Mexico and Spain. Feixa notes the stark social, economic, and cultural differences between the two locations, but argues that in both locations punk subcultures have emerged as a form of social resistance for youth (2006). Moreover, both subcultures share a similar subcultural identity and a strong symbolic attachment to that identity and style. Feixa uses the terms “local gangs” and “global tribes” to illustrate the localized manifestations of much broader, community-based cultures. Like many other studies on punk rock subcultures have found, these youth embrace a marginalized identity and have transformed the stigmatized identity into a symbol of solidarity and resistance. Feixa claims these youth are “distorting mirrors” (p.165) that critique the current social situation through a play on symbols.

Adding to the literature on the international punk subcultures, Basson (2007) studied the emergence of a punk subculture in post-apartheid South Africa. While the subculture is primarily a white subculture, the South African context provides a unique background of race relations unlike that in the United States or United Kingdom. These youth have embraced marginalized identities and have developed a sense of community and patriotism despite racial tensions and the post-apartheid context (Basson, 2007).

Taqwacore, however, is not the first subculture to combine Islam and heavy metal or punk rock. Recently, several studies of the intersection of metal or punk and Islam have been published. For example, Shahabi’s (2006) study of punk rock in Iran and

Baulch's (2007) study of punk and metal in Bali both examine punk rock subcultures and Islamic societies. Although Bali is a Hindu majority country, the interaction between Bali and Indonesia (a Muslim majority country) shaped the music subcultures that emerged. Both scholars emphasize the importance of the particular social context for the political implications and consequences of the punk subculture. In Iran, for example, certain youth appropriated a punk rock style but did not engage in open political resistance, however, their actions and style of dress were taken as very political and in stark contrast to the traditional ideal of Iranian youth (Shahabi, 2006). In Bali, the punk and metal subcultures seemed more focused on identity formation and community development than either political resistance or the appropriation of Western culture (Baulch, 2007).

In both situations, the social context and specifically the political and cultural events that preceded the punk subcultures had important implications for the emergence, specific characteristics, and goals of these punk subcultures. Shahabi (2006) specifically discusses the Westernization attempts made by the Shah in the 1960s followed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that implemented strict Islamic law. This dramatic shift in political power not only affected the overall social and cultural environment, but also the conceptions of youth and standards of acceptable behavior for youth. Under such strict social and religious codes of behavior, simply dressing in a Western style (e.g. punk) is enough to be considered politically subversive. Similarly, in Bali there was a dramatic

breakdown in political power that led to a deregulation of the media, thus allowing Western media into the country where previously all media had been strictly controlled by the government (Baulch, 2007). Further, as Baulch (2007) points out, the increasing tourism, specifically in Jakarta, compounded with existing Balinese identity politics created a dichotomy between Bali and Jakarta. New consumer youth identities (imported via the media) clashed with traditional notions of Balinese youth identity, and coupled with the increasing divisions between Bali and Jakarta, created spaces for subcultural identity formation (Baulch, 2007).

Most recently, in 2008, Levine published a book in which he explores the popularity and existence of heavy metal subcultures in Muslim majority countries, primarily the Middle East. As Levine points out, much of the social and cultural contexts in which these subcultures are fostered lend themselves to a heavy metal subculture (Levine, 2008). Many of these countries and the youth living in these countries have experienced intense fighting, wars, national turmoil, religious struggles, and in general, a tumultuous environment. As Levine argues, the emergence of heavy metal and a heavy metal subculture makes sense in many ways for these youth. These musicians and fans connect in an important way with the violent, angry, and resistant themes prominent in heavy metal (Levine, 2008). Discussed within their social context, (majority Muslim, Middle Eastern and North African countries), these heavy metal subcultures are relevant and meaningful for their members, and aid in the formation of a unique subcultural

identity. Levine asserts that in a country fraught with political turmoil and national struggles, the angry, resistant nature of heavy metal speaks for and engages youth in ways that are meaningful and important to these youth (2008).

All of the studies mentioned that have explored punk subcultures in non-traditional contexts have consistently examined and illustrated the importance of the local social, cultural, and political contexts in which the specific punk subculture emerged (Basson, 2007; Baulch, 2007; Feixa, 2006; Levine, 2008; McLoone, 2004; O'Connor, 2002, 2003; Shahabi, 2006). Further, the social history of each country shaped how, when, and to what extent the subculture emerged as well as the specific characteristics of the subculture. Understanding the underlying social, cultural, political, and in some cases religious context in which a punk subculture develops clearly leads to a greater understanding of not only the subculture, but also how the subcultural empowers its members personally and the meaning of the subcultural identity for its members.

But how does Muslim punk rock exist in the United States? How do these people negotiate these two seemingly paradoxical identities? How do they justify, maintain, and explain their involvement in the two subcultures? What are the national, social, and cultural situations and contexts that have allowed or even encouraged a subculture like the Taqwacores to exist? How does membership in the Taqwacore subculture play out in the day-to-day lives of its members?

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how Taqwacores maintain and justify two seemingly paradoxical identities (punk and Muslim). In order to explore how these people maintain or resolve these two identities, I examine the social context in the United States that has facilitated or allowed for Taqwacore's emergence. Therefore, my main research question is: How has the social context in the United States facilitated the existence of Taqwacore and supported or allowed the Taqwacores to maintain these two paradoxical identities? Taqwacore is a new and active subculture, and thus recording the personal histories of individuals' involvement at this stage will provide a preliminary analysis of the factors and events that have influenced Taqwacore's development.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical areas informed the conceptualization of this research. In developing a framework from which to analyze Taqwacore, I drew from the literature on subcultural theory, punk rock, and Islamic identity in the United States after 9/11. Specifically, the emphasis on labeling individuals and groups as deviant, found in the Chicago School theories, provided an important area of analysis for the Taqwacores, as they are labeled as deviants on at least two levels: 1) as Muslim Americans and 2) as members of a punk rock subculture. Further, the view that subcultures emerge or develop as sites of alternative value and goal production for its members is particularly salient for the Taqwacores.

I view Taqwacore as a Muslim punk rock subculture in the United States that functions for its members as a site for resistance and alternative value and goal production, community development, identity building, and expression through music. As individuals who experience marginalization from both the Islamic world (for being punk and not adhering to Islamic rules) and mainstream U. S. culture (for being Muslim),

I expect that Taqwacore has created a new space for these Muslim Americans to develop identities, articulate frustrations, and redefine their values and standards.

Perhaps these proposed aspects of Taqwacore emerge out of necessity and circumstance, but also, I think the Taqwacores specifically chose punk rock as a musical style and attitude. Punk rock is almost the ideal space for social, political, and cultural resistance, as well as the articulation of a marginalized identity. Those involved with Taqwacore are actively resisting both the dominant U.S. culture and traditional Islamic culture. This attempt at cultural reconciliation and resistance is a common theme in subcultural theory. Further, the styles and symbols Taqwacores employ are powerful symbolic, social, political, and cultural rebellions.

Both The Chicago School, founded at the University of Chicago in the early 20th century, and researchers at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), founded in the 1960s at the University of Birmingham, studied and examined subcultures and developed subcultural theory. The studies and theories that emerged from each served as the basis for the major theoretical positions in subcultural studies. The underlying cultural conflicts that motivated the emergence of subcultures, as proposed by both, are particularly important areas of analysis. As Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, or South Asian Americans, those involved with Taqwacore inherently face cultural conflicts related to growing up Muslim in the United States, similar to what previous subcultural theorists argued in their studies of immigrant populations and lower

or working class populations. Although the specific cultures under examination are different, I relied on The Chicago School and the CCCS for previous conceptualizations concerning how these cultural conflicts were resolved via subcultural involvement.

Drawing on A. P. Cohen's (1985) conceptualization of communities, I approach Taqwacore as a social space that exists not as a formally structured group of individuals, but as a symbolic collective that defines itself relationally to the identities and cultures that are a part of these individuals' lives. Important in A. P. Cohen's (1985) conceptualization of community is his argument that communities depend on social interaction to develop, affirm, and perpetuate their symbolic meaning and thus, their symbolic boundaries.

Closely connected to this social interaction within a community is the development of individual identities in relation to the community. A. P. Cohen (1985) argues that a unique aspect of the symbolic view of communities is that they simultaneously allow a group of individuals to unite under a common theme or idea, while also maintaining their individuality through their unique interpretations and investments in these ideas and the community itself.

Also closely related to the individual identity within the community is A.P. Cohen's (1985) view that communities, and culture in general, define themselves relationally and often in contrast to an Other. I view Taqwacore as utilizing a similar process of oppositional definition, but on multiple levels, contrasting themselves with

both U.S. and Islamic cultures. I expect those involved with Taqwacore to experience something similar to W. E. B. Du Bois' (1903/1982) concept of the "double consciousness" (p. 3) of African Americans, in that these individuals experience a "twoness" (Du Bois, 1903/1982, p. 3), or a dual-identity as both Americans and Muslims. Also implicit in this double consciousness is not just self-awareness, but also an awareness of how society views the individual. Nonetheless, Du Bois pointed out that there are a variety of potential responses to such a situation, and I maintain that Taqwacore is one response for certain individuals to this situation.

Further, in conceptualizing the role of identity within Taqwacore, both on the individual and collective levels, it is important to think about the two seemingly paradoxical identities they combine. As Simmel (1955) argued, the modern social condition allows individuals to incorporate or exist within different social roles. Previously, these identities or social roles were closely connected and each different role an individual had was an expansion of or built upon the other social roles or identities within his or her life. In contrast, now these roles or identities may not overlap or relate at all, which might explain how it is possible for these individuals to combine two seemingly paradoxical identities. Importantly, Simmel argued that these multiple affiliations or roles can intersect and produce conflict or strain for the individual. For the individuals involved in Taqwacore, the overlapping of a Muslim and a punk rock identity seemingly would produce such strain or tension.

Examining the role of punk rock for Taqwacore is important, especially considering recent studies of punk subcultures in non-Western countries. While the Taqwacores are primarily from the United States¹, the interplay between punk rock as a transnational and accessible cultural framework and traditional Islamic values and rituals as a localized culture parallels some recent studies. One aspect of modern punk rock subcultures that has become evident in these recent studies is the commercial accessibility of punk rock, demonstrated by non-Western youth appropriation of a punk rock musical style or physical appearance, style, and attitude (Baulch, 2007; Shahabi, 2006). Especially in situations where the appropriation of punk is merely stylistic and appropriated as a Western culture by upper-class youth with consumer access to such products and knowledge (Shahabi, 2006), the commercialism and consumerism of punk rock are clear. I think this commercial aspect of punk rock has allowed punk to become a transnational culture, of sorts, that can be appropriated by individuals on varying levels of commitment and resistance.

Following current studies, I view Taqwacore, in ways, as an appropriation of a global subculture on a local and personal level. These instances of localized appropriation of a global culture illustrate the commerciality of punk rock, its consumer appeal, and accessibility to youth around the world. I question punk rock's commercial accessibility as an influence on Taqwacore's appropriation of punk rock and the media's

¹ There is a Canadian band, Secret Trial Five, who identifies as Taqwacore.

use of the label “Muslim punk rock”. In fact, several individuals have said that Taqwacore is “...neither Muslim nor punk” (Knight, quoted in Hammingson, 2008), casting doubt on their true identification as punk rockers and as Muslims, and simultaneously highlighting the media’s attention to and influence over the definition and classification of Taqwacore as punk rock.

Nonetheless, the localized level of this appropriation is where, I think, identity development has emerged for the Taqwacores. Specifically, I expect that the Taqwacores have embraced punk rock as a subculture and music style as a form of open resistance to both mainstream American society and traditional Islam, as a means of community development, and identity building in the context of U.S. government policies and prominent media stereotypes of Muslim Americans.

The situation of Muslim Americans, especially Muslim Arab Americans since 9/11 has compounded the above subcultural factors and has increased Taqwacore’s marginalization, resistance, and community and identity development in the United States. Through a lens of social labeling and essentialized identities, alternative value production, community and individual identity development, resistance and marginalization, the interplay between transnational and local, I explore how the specific U.S. context has influenced the emergence of Taqwacore.

Research Methods

Using this theoretical framework, I developed a social history of the Taqwacores in the United States. To develop this social history, I examined the U.S. social context that has facilitated, if not encouraged, the emergence of Taqwacore. Specifically, I explored the cultural, political, and social influences in the lives of specific Taqwacore members by recording and analyzing their personal histories and experiences with Taqwacore.

In conceptualizing Taqwacore as a subculture, I drew from Gelder's (2005) definition:

Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. They may represent themselves in this way, since subcultures are usually well aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them, and so on. But they will also be represented like this by others, who in response can bring an entire apparatus of social classification and regulation to bear upon them. (Gelder, 2005; p. 1; emphasis original)

Important in Gelder's (2005) conceptualization of subculture is his emphasis not just on self-representation and identification with the subculture on the part of the members, but also the representation of the subculture by society, especially the boundaries that society uses to classify and understand the subculture. For subcultural studies, it is important to understand not only how the members of a subculture represent themselves, but also how they are represented by and exist within society.

Therefore, I critically analyzed media publications and broadcasts about Taqwacore to explore how the media and society understand Taqwacore and if these views have changed since Taqwacore's initial emergence. Many of these articles include interviews with various members of Taqwacore, including band members and others involved in the subculture, about Taqwacore's development and their personal experiences and involvement with Taqwacore. In analyzing these publications, I looked for themes that emerged across articles concerning the social, cultural, and religious factors that influenced Taqwacore's emergence and existence.

I also interviewed members of the Taqwacore subculture to gain an understanding of Taqwacore on an individual level. Through these interviews, I recorded Taqwacore members' personal oral histories of their involvement in Taqwacore. Recording Taqwacore members' personal accounts of how and why Taqwacore developed illuminated the social, cultural, and political contexts that preceded and influenced certain individuals to become involved with Taqwacore. Interviews and personal contact with subcultural members allowed me to gain an understanding of Taqwacore on an individual level, explore the personal experiences of specific Muslim Americans, and determine some of the specific motivating factors for involvement in Taqwacore. I conducted these interviews and collected personal histories primarily by telephone and personal contact via email.

In order to explore my theoretical framework, I focused on six aspects of individuals' personal involvement with Taqwacore that guided both my critical analysis of articles and my interviews and personal contact with Taqwacore members:

- Involvement in and motivation for joining Taqwacore
- Explanations and justifications of Taqwacore
- The social context in which Taqwacore emerged (any social, national, cultural events that individual's cite as particularly relevant to their membership in Taqwacore)
- How individuals manage these two identities
- Issues that are salient in Taqwacore membership (religious, political, musical)
- Perceived benefits of being involved in Taqwacore

Specific questions that guided my conversations and correspondence with individuals include (but are not limited to):

- How did you get involved with Taqwacore?
- What motivated or influenced you to get involved with Taqwacore?
- What has changed for you as a result of your involvement in Taqwacore?
- What is Taqwacore? What does Taqwacore mean to you?

- How do you explain and justify Taqwacore as a subculture and in your own life?
- How do you justify and explain being a member of both the punk and Muslim communities?
- What is the relationship between these two identities in your life and how do you manage the two?
- Why do you think Taqwacore developed in the United States when it did? What made it happen here and now?
- What issues (social, cultural, political, religious) are important to you as a Taqwacore?

These questions and guidelines directed my analyses and explored the specific aspects of my theoretical framework. I looked for key individual experiences concerning resistance, marginalization, individual and community identity development, alternative value production, essentialized identities, and social labeling, as well as collective subcultural experiences and the importance of punk rock as a specific venue of expression for the Taqwacores.

I transcribed all interviews, although I did not delete or code individual's names, as these individuals' identities are important and relevant in establishing the credibility of information and in conveying their personal, individual histories of involvement in Taqwacore. Further, the Taqwacores are based on an internationally published novel and many Taqwacore bands have received international media attention, are the subjects of an

upcoming documentary and movie based on the novel, and are connected through social networking websites. Therefore, concealing these individuals' identities is not necessary as my study will not create new risk or increase any potential risk for these individuals.

CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF TAQWACORE

Shortly after the publication of the novel *The Taqwacores* in 2004, Taqwacore bands emerged across The United States and one band formed in Canada. Knight's do-it-yourself distribution of the novel initiated many of the social connections among people involved with Taqwacore. During the summer of 2007, five Taqwacore bands organized a Taqwa-tour across the Northeastern United States. These bands are located in a variety of cities and the Taqwa-tour initiated and solidified many of these friendships and helped create a fan base for Taqwacore. See Table 1 for descriptions of these five Taqwacore bands.

I interviewed five people directly involved with Taqwacore (see Table 2 for descriptions of these people). I interviewed two members of the band The Kominas, one member of the band Al-Thawra, the director of the movie based on the novel *The Taqwacores*, and one person who supports and identifies as Taqwacore and has published a graphic novel based on his life as an Arab American. The internet, specifically social networking websites, has been important in maintaining these friendships, popularizing Taqwacore, and distributing music. Since 2006, the Taqwacores have received increasing media attention, including a documentary about the Taqwacores and a movie

based on the novel. Most recently, several Taqwacore bands have organized a tour during the summer of 2009 across the United States.

Role of the Novel

The term “Taqwacore”, first coined by Knight in his book, reflects the hybrid identity of Muslim Americans and the synthesis of Islamic and U.S. cultures within many Muslim Americans’ lives. “Taqwa” is the Islamic concept of an awareness or consciousness of God (Maqsood, 2006) and is sometimes translated as the fear of God (Esposito, 2005). “Core” is short for “hardcore”, a term used to describe an individual or group of individuals characterized by an intense devotion to that specific group and its values who often reject the values of mainstream society. Important in the conception of Taqwacore is of course the novel, *The Taqwacores*. The novel was very often individuals’ first encounter with or exposure to Taqwacore and the possibilities Taqwacore encompasses. Before *The Taqwacores* was officially published, Knight gave away copies of the book to people he met and often mailed copies to interested individuals. Knight’s do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to distributing and publishing his novel helped forge many of the friendships that Taqwacore is built upon and embodies a central value of punk rock. In fact, it was Knight who organized the Taqwa-Tour in 2007.

The novel tells the story of a fictional Muslim punk scene in California exported to Buffalo, New York via Jehangir (one of the book’s main characters) who has moved

into this punk house filled with young Muslims. The novel concludes with a huge Taqwacore concert put together by Jehangir that brings all the infamous California Taqwacore bands to New York. While not all of the characters in the book are punks and not all of them are devout Muslims, they all question Islam, what it means to be Muslim, what it means to be “punk”, and how these two identities and lifestyles are compatible. The novel’s main character, Yusef, is not a punk rocker but, in living in the house, he discovers an authentic interpretation of Islam in those around him. The house includes a mixture of individuals including Yusef, a college student who abstains from much of the debauchery that often ensues, Umar who is a straightedge practicing Muslim with multiple tattoos, Rabeya, a feminist riotgrrrl who always wears a burqa, and Jehangir, a punk Muslim who indulges in the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll lifestyle. Life in the house definitely combines punk rock, Islam, parties, prayer, loud music, and at times intense discussions of Islam and being Muslim. The house is an interesting mixture of piety and punk rock lifestyles that, in the beginning, confuses Yusef but later begins to make sense as his conceptualization of Islam and of being Muslim expand. The dual nature of life as a Muslim American is captured in the dual function of the house—as both a place of worship (Friday prayers were often held in the punk house) and as a party house (Friday evenings often resulted in large house parties).

Almost everyone I interviewed cited the novel as not only influential in their involvement in Taqwacore, but also as an inspiration and reassurance in their lives. As a

novel about discovering one's self-identity and generally trying to figure out life, *The Taqwacores* touches on many of the issues young American Muslims face and served as the jumping off point for many of those involved in the real-life Taqwacores.

Eyad Zahra² explained his first experience with the novel: "...everything stopped. I can't explain it other than that." Eyad also was inspired by the novel to become creatively involved and immediately began turning the book into a screenplay: "This sort of took—stole my attention and my heart and my passion. My creative drive just went really right at it..." In fact, it was the novel that brought Shahejan Khan and Basim Usmani together to form a band. Basim said, "I gave him (Shahejan) the book and it totally speaks to him and all the sudden he opens up to me and then we begin playing music together..."

In addition to being a source of inspiration for many of these individuals, the novel was also reassuring and expresses many of the questions and feelings of growing up Muslim in the United States. As Shahejan stated, "Basically, it was the kind of book that I was probably looking for my whole life...it was something that I really related to. The main character I felt was me in many ways," attesting to the novel's relevance in his life as a young Muslim American. While the novel focuses on Yusef's personal struggles with the everyday application of Islam in his life, many of the characters question or

² Please note that I include interviewees' full names the first time I quote them. In all subsequent quotations, I refer to them by first name only.

challenge the traditional concept of being Muslim. Shahejan went on to say that the book was “...reassuring for me personally, that all these questions that I had were normal.”

Questions in particular about sex, alcohol, drugs, homosexuality and the strictness of religious rules often arose in the novel. Those I interviewed found a reassurance not only in the fact that many of their personal struggles and questions are a normal part of growing up but also that other people, both fictional and real, were facing these same dilemmas. As Basim stated, “I didn’t realize that there would be any sort of people with the same ideas as me about religion until I read *The Taqwacores*.”

The novel also became important because it articulates a broadened conceptualization of Islam that embraces these punk rockers and advocates the idea of a God that can value the religious nature of a drunk, rambling Muslim with a Mohawk and tattoos. This conceptualization brought assurance to many of the real-life Taqwacores because they saw themselves in these characters, as punk rockers or “misfit Muslims” or just people who needed to come to terms with Islam in their own individual way. Perhaps one of the main ideas expressed by the novel is that Islam as a religion or a concept is broad enough to not only include but also embrace those who stray from the mainstream, who question religion, question themselves, and ultimately decide for themselves what being Muslim means.

The book is a common thread among those involved with Taqwacore that not only gave a name to a seemingly already emerging community, but also became a point

of reference within the group. Shahjehan stated, “That’s probably one common thing that all these people that we’ve met over the years have is that they’ve all read this book and relate to it in one way or another, even the non-Muslim members of our bands can relate to it because it’s a book about identity and confusion...” As various individuals across the United States read *The Taqwacores*, they were inspired in various ways to bring the novel to life, by starting Taqwacore bands, creating a movie and documentary, or simply by expressing support for Taqwacore.

Admittedly, what is emerging in real life is different from the Taqwacore scene conceptualized in the novel, but the underlying attitudes and questions have materialized in a very real way. So how did Taqwacore make the move from a fictional subculture in the novel to a real-life community? Further, how do those involved explain Taqwacore and their involvement in Taqwacore?

CHAPTER IV

DISTINGUISHING TAQWACORE

While punk and heavy metal subcultures have emerged in non-Western countries, those I interviewed expressed the unique position of being Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Arab in the United States as particularly salient for Taqwacore's emergence. Specifically cited were feelings of frustration and experiences unique to Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, or Middle Easterners within the United States.

Several people I interviewed specifically described Taqwacore as a uniquely American phenomena or concept. As Eyad said, "Taqwacore is very American Muslim," and "I can see other Muslim people appreciating Taqwacore, but, it's an American thing." In fact, Marwan Kamel illustrated perhaps one of the most striking differences between heavy metal and punk scenes in the Middle East or Muslim majority countries and Taqwacore by emphasizing the U.S. context in relation to the labeling of Taqwacore: "I think that the Taqwacore label is only important in the West because it's like, in Malaysia there's been punk since the 80s, right? And nobody cares about that (Muslim label) because everybody who plays punk rock there is Muslim, you know. So that identity (Muslim) only becomes important when—if—you're an outsider." Further, Basim said, "I mean Indonesia and Malaysia have had Muslim punk for twenty, thirty

years now. Singapore also has...there's Muslim punks over there, too. They're not necessarily calling themselves Taqwacore, but just by happenstance they happen to be both things (Muslim and punk)." Toufic El Rassi also discussed the Muslim label as a uniquely Western or American phenomena: "If these bands (Taqwacore) were playing in their respective countries, they'd just be called punk rockers, you know, but because they're playing in the West, they have to be defined that way." Perhaps, the fact that these individuals are minorities in the United States is one reason why Taqwacore has been specifically discussed as Muslim American punk. The distinction that is made between "punk" and "Muslim punk" is an external construction that emphasizes difference, distinguishes Taqwacore from other punk subcultures, and in doing so, establishes Taqwacore as a separate community. As several individuals pointed out, the religious distinction in the label Muslim punk only becomes important in the U.S. context. To exist as a community, Taqwacore depends on the U.S. context to be able to define itself or be defined by others as an opposition or contrast. What Taqwacore is, what it expresses, and how it is explained or defined are all deeply connected to the U.S. context, even the need to distinguish Muslim punk or Taqwacore from just punk rock reflects the very American character of this subculture or community.

The American Novel

Even the novel is "...a very American story...the idea of having this guy Yusef drifting between social groups and trying to find his own way is a very American

story...”(Shahjehan). It seems then, that some aspects of U.S. society or culture lend themselves contextually to the emergence of Taqwacore. As Shahjehan points out, the ability to migrate between social groups and question or challenge the cultures in which one is raised is not necessarily exclusive to the United States, but is indicative of an underlying value or idea in U.S. society that individuals can change their social position. Whether socioeconomically or subculturally, the belief in being able to control and change one’s position does resonate deeply with American culture. The story of Taqwacore reflects this belief that individuals have the capability to maneuver socially. Even for the real-life Taqwacores, this social mobility or the ability to create a new subculture rests definitively on the U.S. context.

Further, Shahjehan points out that the United States has historically or traditionally been “...a place where there *are* a lot of cultural movements—revolutions in ways of thinking...” In ways, then, Taqwacore is in line with this tradition in the United States, and the U.S. context is fitting for Taqwacore’s emergence. Nonetheless, several people I interviewed did point out that Taqwacore is not “...a purely U.S. thing...” (Shahjehan), but it was conceptualized by an American and emerged in the United States. Many of the reasons, however, and explanations for why Taqwacore emerged, focused around recent political and social events in the United States.

Distinctions between Taqwacore and Other Heavy Metal

As I pointed out earlier, heavy metal or punk rock music scenes or subcultures exist outside the United States in Muslim majority countries. While some individuals involved in these scenes may identify as Taqwacore, others do not. In fact, Toufic related an incident that occurred in March 2009 when four Taqwacore bands played at the South by Southwest Music and Film Conference in Austin, TX (which I attended). The Taqwacore bands were part of a showcase entitled “Heavy Metal Islam,” organized by Mark Levine that featured several of the bands he wrote about in his book, also titled *Heavy Metal Islam*. There was definitely segregation between the Heavy Metal Islam bands and the Taqwacore bands that specifically referred to and promoted themselves as “Taqwacore.” The bands, however, shared a practice space the day before the show, and according to Toufic:

I don’t know if you remember the bands that played that night, one of them was Iranian and they weren’t Muslim at all, but they’re clearly Middle Eastern and...they actually refused to be labeled Taqwacore...because the night before at the practice space, they were there and there was an exchange where they (the Iranian band) said, “Oh, we know about you guys. We don’t want to be associated with that—we’re not Muslim.”

As I pointed out earlier, not all of those involved with Taqwacore are Muslim and many of those who did grow up in Islamic families are non-practicing. The situation that occurred at South by Southwest points to two things: First, that Taqwacore is commonly understood by outsiders as Muslim punk and further, assumptions continue that all

Taqwacores are Muslims. Secondly, I think the events at South by Southwest illustrate the differences between music scenes in the Middle East and Taqwacore. This particular band, which refused to be labeled Taqwacore, had a very rigid conceptualization of what Taqwacore is, that according to those I have interviewed, is overly restrictive and misunderstood. The band had a clear idea of how they and their music should be classified, whereas Taqwacore does not have such definitive boundaries. A second difference between the two music scenes or communities is that the bands that comprised the Heavy Metal Islam portion of the showcase were all from different countries and, to my knowledge, had never met before. Of course, this is in part due to the political, religious, and social situations in their respective countries that make playing and touring difficult, and thus inhibit their abilities to meet and play with other bands. But this is not always the case, as Mark Levine illustrated in his book when discussing some of the huge music festivals in the Middle East and South Asia, including a festival that engaged Israelis and Palestinians in the same audience and on the same stage, proving that in certain situations, music scenes can overshadow or exist despite political, religious, and social conflicts.

Except for these festivals, the music scenes in the Middle East and other Muslim majority countries that Levine describes seem rather disjointed or fragmented, illustrated at South by Southwest, as most of the bands did not know each other. While specific bands from various countries have gained international popularity, the overall success of the Heavy Metal Islam scene or subculture seems dependent upon individual bands

spread across different countries and is not centrally located or working to build larger local subcultures. In contrast, Taqwacore, while not constrained to the United States, has its roots in the United States and several bands within one context that have become almost a foundation for Taqwacore. Basim argued that this is one of the primary differences between music scenes in Muslim majority countries and Taqwacore:

What's different is, I think, the heavy metal scene and the other scenes that have emerged (in the Middle East and South Asia)—those are really short-lived. If you think about where they're playing and then the fact that they're still playing heavy metal and give their lives to play the music they love, that says volumes, but that's not really a scene. That's one band that is heroic enough to do it...I feel though, that calling it Taqwacore and having a *group* of people that collaborate makes it much wider, makes it much more important than if there were, you know, one person.

The sense of community or of a group is important not just in conceptualizing what Taqwacore is, but also in distinguishing it from other music subcultures. The individuals I interviewed focus on Taqwacore as a collaborative group that shares ideas, supports each other, and distinguishes itself in various ways from other subcultures and music scenes. The fact that Taqwacore is distinguished from punk rock in general and from punk or heavy metal in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries strengthens the conceptualization of Taqwacore as a community. Basim further discussed the differences and similarities between these scenes and Taqwacore:

I don't think there's a substantial difference, though, because I mean we're probably dealing with the same issues, but maybe because we're born and raised American—a lot of us—we have more identity politics tied up in it, and they might be more certain about what Islam is and what it isn't.

Basim emphasizes an important distinction between Taqwacore and punk or heavy metal scenes in Muslim countries: in the United States, there is more of a choice about what Islam means and how it is practiced is not so strictly defined as in some countries where Islam is explicitly defined. In turn, as he also points out, Muslim Americans face more identity conflicts. In some Muslim countries with punk and heavy metal scenes or subcultures, musicians are considered blasphemous and are harassed or arrested for playing (or attempting to play) music (Levine, 2008). Hence, developing a community or subculture in some countries has proven to be difficult. Again, this emphasizes the importance of the U.S. context for Taqwacore's development. Also, in facing more identity conflicts and questions over what Islam means, the need for a community, for a support system has emerged. Musicians in Muslim countries know their actions are not always accepted (or legal) and perhaps have a more structured conceptualization of Islam. In the United States "Islam is what you make of it" (Basim).

An interesting similarity between the two subcultures or scenes is that like most of the Taqwacore bands, the Iranian band that Toufic mentioned is not Muslim, or at least they are not practicing Muslims. Nonetheless, most of the media and publications about both Taqwacore and this Iranian band describe them as Muslim.

CHAPTER V

WHAT IS TAQWACORE?

Role of the Media: Analysis of Recent Publications

I analyzed 30 articles (all online versions; see Appendix A. for list of publications) published between April 2006 and March 2009 about the Taqwacores and Taqwacore bands to examine how the media and those outside Taqwacore understand and describe it. Fourteen of these articles were published by major news sources available both in print and online (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Newsweek*). Six of these articles came from webzines or creative blog websites where issues are published at regular intervals and the articles, submitted by various contributors, are subject to the editor's approval and online comments. Three articles appeared in online versions of local or regional free press publications; two were transcribed radio broadcasts; one was a transcribed television broadcast; one appeared in an online literary journal; two appeared in online editions of university newspapers; and one article appeared in the online-only version of a major publication. I did not include articles that were published exclusively on individuals' websites or personal blogs and I did not include articles (whether published personally or by a media source) that drew mostly from previously published articles.

Of these 30 articles, 27 of them explicitly describe or define Taqwacore as “Muslim punk”. The three articles that did not specifically define Taqwacore as Muslim punk described Taqwacore as a real-life version of the subculture described in the novel (but without explicitly calling it “Muslim punk rock”), as a subculture that allows Muslim youth to reject both Islamic and U.S. culture “under the banner of punk...” (Abdalla, 2007), and as a musical genre with no clear definition.

The majority of the articles discuss Taqwacore in relation to the novel and offer translations of the word Taqwacore as a mixture of religion and punk rock. The post-9/11 context in the United States is often cited as a source of alienation and frustration for the individuals involved with Taqwacore, specifically racial tensions, the war on Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy. Many of these articles discuss Taqwacore as an expression of a dual identity (Muslim and American). Taqwacore is described as a space that has allowed these individuals to navigate and maintain both Muslim and American identities. These articles describe Taqwacore as expressing a frustration with Islam and the United States and as a means to maintain membership in both cultures. This frustration is characterized as a conflict between religious or parent culture and U.S. culture.

Taqwacore is also discussed as punk music with a Muslim connotation, or a blend of Islam and U.S. cultures. Many of the articles argue that the post-9/11 social and political context in the U.S. created an identity conflict for these individuals and that Taqwacore has helped these individuals combine these two aspects of their lives. Several

of the articles did specifically discuss Taqwacore as a rebellion or rejection of both cultures, and this was primarily explained through their punk rock music and style.

These articles were published in popular or mainstream publications, and therefore provide descriptions of Taqwacore, however, they offer limited explanations of how involvement in Taqwacore has helped these individuals reject or resolve these conflicts. Further, while most of the articles referred to Taqwacore as a subculture, few of them discussed the benefits of a community of individuals or how being involved in a group has helped resolve these identity issues or reject U.S. and Islamic cultures.

The overall discussion of Taqwacore in these articles focused on Taqwacore as a hybrid subculture that combines Islam and punk rock. These articles do not entirely explain how these two cultures or identities are brought together or fused through Taqwacore. Admittedly, the purpose of mainstream or popular press is often purely descriptive, however, several of the individuals that I interviewed who were involved with Taqwacore discussed the nature of the media attention Taqwacore has received and argued that the media have failed to gain an in-depth understanding of Taqwacore. Additionally, they argued that the media have made Taqwacore into a spectacle. Several of the titles of articles discussed here illustrate the representation of Taqwacore as a hybrid and as a spectacle: “Nevermind the Burkas,” “Slam Dancing for Allah,” “Music from the Mosque,” “Allah, Amps, and Anarchy,” “Muhammad rocked the Casbah,” and “Mosque Pit.”

These articles broadly discuss what Taqwacore is, based on the novel and the translation of the word Taqwacore. These articles describe Taqwacore as a Muslim punk hybrid subculture or as punk rock influenced by Islam. Although, Knight argues that this definition "...isn't untrue exactly, but it's problematic...you could say that Taqwacore is Muslim punk, but you could just as easily say that it's neither Muslim nor punk." (Hammingson, 2008). While this sample of articles is not exhaustive, it allows a glance at some of the media coverage that the Taqwacores and Taqwacore bands have received since their emergence.

Taqwacore Self-Definitions

Throughout my interviews, I realized that the definition of Taqwacore is difficult to articulate precisely. While all agreed that the concept of Taqwacore as Muslim punk rock emerged from the novel, everyone I interviewed also emphasized that Taqwacore goes beyond a music scene, genre, or subculture. For example, when I asked Shahjehan about Taqwacore being labeled as Muslim punk, he replied, "I mean that's—that's not entirely accurate, I think." For some, the focus was on Taqwacore as a group of friends, as Shahjehan pointed out: "It's not necessarily a scene as much as it's sort of a group of friends, of like-minded people who share some ideas with each other...a community of artists, writers, musicians, photographers, just friends really is the best way to describe it."

Contrary to most (but not all) media publications and broadcasts, the individuals involved with Taqwacore are not all Muslim, not all of the individuals involved come from Islamic religious backgrounds, not all of the individuals involved come from Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Arab backgrounds, and not all Taqwacore music is punk rock. So, this definition of Taqwacore as Muslim punk rock does not seem to capture the overall concept or meaning of Taqwacore. Despite the fact that all of the individuals I interviewed grew up in or come from Muslim backgrounds, they did, however, emphasize the fact that Taqwacore, while it is commonly defined as Muslim punk is not directed toward or focused specifically on Muslims. The focus or meaning of Taqwacore is in developing a community, as Shahjehan pointed out, “It’s a group of friends...but it’s not like, it’s not just a thing that—something that Muslims might just relate to...it’s almost like a community...” Further, Basim pointed out that Taqwacore goes beyond the Muslim punk rock description often used and does not endorse Islam, “...It’s a little bit more complicated than what people think it is. I mean, a little bit of it is about power and like point of views and about new ideas, and we’re not trying to like push some form of Islam on people...” In fact, Taqwacore tends to challenge as much as it embraces Islam.

Eyad further explained, “...It’s taken on a lot of different shapes and forms. It is that punk Muslim sound that these guys have been creating, but it can also be a spoken word artist or a hip hop artist. I see Taqwacore everywhere now.” In the above statement, Eyad referred to Taqwacore as “punk Muslim” as opposed to “Muslim punk”

as it is commonly referred to, and he is not the only person who made this distinction. In fact, Basim purposely made this distinction, advocating the “punk Muslim” phrasing:

Taqwacore in the novel is described as punk Muslims. I know this is a silly change of switching one word around and how that would change. It should be punk Muslims (rather) than to be Muslim punk, I feel...It's not the actual type of music, but when you say punk Muslims you're talking about the noun—of the people playing it—but Muslim punk, you're defining the music itself.

As Basim pointed out, switching these two words can change the conceptualization and meaning of Taqwacore from describing a genre of music to a description of a person or group of people. Both Marwan and Toufic argued that Taqwacore is often defined as Muslim punk because it is a simple or concise way to describe it. Marwan stated, “It's very easy to define it (Taqwacore) as Muslim punk...how punk is it really? How Muslim is it?” Further, in response to a question about the label of Muslim punk rock that has been consistently used to describe Taqwacore, Toufic explained, “That's the problem with trying to put a label on something or trying to define it, you know, people take the road of least resistance, the path of least resistance. I mean, you're not going to—every time you have to explain it—you're not going to sit down and you know, write a paragraph or explain every little caveat and exception, so the easiest way to do it is to say ‘Muslim punk’. But that said, it's true, there's metal, there's hip hop...there are actually other emerging genres.”

So, while the media have continued to define and focus on Taqwacore as Muslim punk rock, in contrast those I interviewed emphasized that Taqwacore is a community or

a group of artists that is not exclusive to Muslims and do not promote Islam. Further, Taqwacore requires individuals to define and interpret Taqwacore for themselves and perhaps this is how and why it has gained power and meaning to those involved. This subjectivity blurs previously erected subcultural boundaries, religious boundaries, and national boundaries, as illustrated by the diverse individuals involved in Taqwacore (such as Knight, a Caucasian New Yorker who converted to Islam at 16; Marwan, a Muslim American living in Chicago whose father immigrated from Syria; and Eyad, a Muslim American filmmaker born and raised in Ohio). Perhaps Taqwacore has gained popularity and membership because it requires its members decide for themselves what it means to be Taqwacore. Drawing on the Islamic emphasis on the strength of individual faith set within a wider religious community (Esposito, 2005), Taqwacore emphasizes individual interpretation and self-identity, while at the same time, it has formed a national and international community of musicians, artists, fans, Muslims, and non-Muslims.

CHAPTER VI

DUAL FRUSTRATION

Taqwacore fundamentally is an expression: an expression of frustration. I broadly describe this as frustration, but this frustration is dual in nature, toward both the United States and Islam. The most articulated motivations expressed by those I interviewed for their involvement in Taqwacore are a dual frustration, feelings of resistance, and the need for a community. These are not only the personal motivations for involvement, but also represent the underlying social conditions that have made the emergence of Taqwacore possible and perhaps inevitable.

The United States

Historical basis. Taqwacore has become a kind of “platform for discontent Muslims” (Basim). Part of this discontent is deeply rooted in the aftermath of 9/11 in the United States, but also there seems to be a historical basis in the United States. As Basim stated, “I think the way the history books are constructed here, the way the class is constructed here, the way that society is constructed here is like everything else is inferior to American culture...” Further, Toufic argued, “I think it goes back to the whole question of Orientalism and the whole Edward Said thing about the Other and how the West defines itself in relation to not being what these people are and so think about it, a

lot of labels and definitions...that we have today are largely things that Europeans invented to define this other group of people.” Arab Muslim Americans’ constructed identities and images have shifted over time from a degree of “whiteness” (the first Arab immigrants were considered White) to an essentialized Other (Naber, 2008a). In fact, Byng (2008) argues that Muslim Americans’ externally constructed identities have become similar to racial identities in that they are used to designate group boundaries and thus organize social inequality.

Basim and Toufic touch on a very interesting aspect of U.S. society or culture that, according to them, has been influential in Taqwacore’s emergence. The attitude of American cultural superiority and the notion of Orientalism and how the West defines itself in opposition to a constructed Other are related to Taqwacore’s emergence in the United States. Even the label of Muslim punk imposes a classification on Taqwacore in that the Muslim identity is specified. Similar to Du Bois’ double-consciousness, the individuals involved with Taqwacore are distinguished from or contrasted with other subcultures through their dual classification as Muslim punks, and are aware of themselves in these externally constructed terms. The label Muslim punk itself serves as a constant reminder of how others view Taqwacore.

Post 9/11 context. It is 9/11 that really marks the time when American sentiments transformed the image of Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Americans. In fact, Naber cites several scholars who argue that 9/11 “...consolidated the racialization of

the category ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ as a signifier of nonwhite Otherness...” (2008a, pp. 1-2). Further, Naber argues that there has been a “racialization of Islam” since 9/11 that has been the basis of the backlash against Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, and Middle Eastern people (2008a, p. 2). Particularly fueled by 9/11 and the resulting United States Government security initiatives, the Patriot Act, and the discrimination toward Muslims (and those perceived as Muslim) that occurred, many individuals I interviewed suddenly felt not only different but misunderstood in the society in which they had grown up. Toufic argued that the historical and post-9/11 context in the United States made Taqwacore’s emergence inevitable, “I think that the racism and the intolerance towards Arabs and Muslims in the United States was so perverse and all-consuming before 9/11, that it only got much worse after 9/11. It got to the point where, and it still is that way today, that if you call yourself an Arab or a Muslim, it’s bad here in this country...so I think that the United States society or culture, attitude towards Muslims and Arabs and other groups was necessarily going to bring about some kind of reaction from young Americans...and so I think it makes perfect sense for this (Taqwacore) to happen.”

On a more personal level, Shahejan pointed out that “I had never experienced any racism before 9/11. I wasn’t necessarily conscious of being any different from anyone else...The day after 9/11 some kid, I was a senior in high school, and some kid was like, ‘What did your people do?’ It (9/11) created this climate of fear that I mean, yeah

Muslims have been portrayed negatively in the media for quite some time, but after that it was just all downhill.” In addition, Toufic commented on the stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs especially in the media: “The first images that pop into people’s minds are terrorism and violence, and not only that but I think discrimination towards Arabs and Muslims, and other people—South Asians...is openly tolerated in our society. It’s something that you see on TV and mainstream culture and movies and if you watched the news after 9/11, the bias and the prejudice was so transparent...”

Perhaps the most prevalent reason given for why Taqwacore emerged in the United States when it did is 9/11, an event that dramatically increased the discrimination and harassment many Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans experienced. Particularly since 9/11, concern about Muslims in America has dramatically increased (Leonard, 2005) and Muslims Americans (particularly those who are perceived as Arab or Middle Eastern) have faced discrimination, harassment, questioning, detainment, and even assault justified by the Patriot Act (Abdo, 2005; Cankar, 2008; Jamal, 2008; Naber, 2008a, 2008b; Pereira, Carton, & Ball, 2001). Most of the individuals I interviewed said that 9/11 did not initiate this harassment, but it did increase stereotypes and associations of Muslims with violence, terrorism, and in many ways imposed a non-human status on those individuals perceived to be Muslim. Eyad said that hopefully Taqwacore and his movie can work toward negating these stereotypes: “You

know, the hope is that it (the Taqwacore film) helps people see Muslims in a normal way.” When I inquired what he meant specifically by “normal”, he replied:

Not in a normal way, but just in a more humane way, that’s what I mean—as *human beings*, not as enemies or others or weird people that cover their hair, you know what I mean? We’re just human beings that—we *walk and talk*. It’s very simple, but unfortunately, in today’s world it can’t be grasped (laughter).

Shahjehan expanded on this hope that Taqwacore music and art will negate stereotypes,

If that changes somebody’s opinion, say, let’s just say somebody just actually thought all Muslims are terrorists or something like that and then if somebody reads a story and their like, “Wow, there are people that do other things, you know, that we can know about”, then I guess that’s done some good.

To compound this discrimination and stereotyping of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, after 9/11 many Muslim Americans became very conscious of their Muslim identity in ways they had not before. For example, Shahjehan stated earlier that 9/11 made him aware of being different. Shahjehan stated, “After that (9/11), you’re sort of forced to explain yourself to people in a way that you weren’t before. Whether you like it or not, you sort of suddenly become a spokesperson (for your religion or ethnicity)....” The combination of dehumanizing stereotypes, increased self-awareness of one’s ethnic or religious heritage, and the expectation to explain and represent some broad ethnic or religious group are closely connected to the external identity construction

of the Other in the United States. The external identity construction of Muslims as the Other already existed in the United States, but 9/11 intensified the negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in the U.S.

Basim speculated a major reason for this is that "...until those two towers came down, a lot of people who hadn't made opinions yet (about Islam and the Middle East) were allowed to stay ambivalent. But, once the towers came down and right afterwards, when people went to war in Iraq, people were forced to make more of an opinion about things and I think because of that a lot of Muslims felt their identity coming to the forefront more so than they did before..." As Basim pointed out, certainly 9/11 and the Patriot Act were catalysts for discrimination against Muslims, but becoming involved in a war with a Muslim majority country forced Americans to take a side.

According to a report published by *The Washington Post* in 2006 (Deane & Fears, 2006), 46% of Americans had a negative view of Islam, a number they claim is seven percentage points higher than it was in the months immediately following 9/11. Further, the percentage of Americans who believe that Islam encourages or increases violence had doubled between January 2002 (14%) and March 2006 (33%). The article points to the media's focus on Muslim extremists as a major reason for the association of Islam with violence. The media's focus on extremist actions, combined with an American attitude of cultural superiority and the external identity construction of Muslims (or those

perceived to be Muslim) as the Other, have created and perpetuated stereotypes and have been a source of frustration toward the United States for those involved with Taqwacore.

Shahjehan and Basim related personal stories or experiences from shortly after 9/11 that illustrated hostility towards them as Muslim and South Asian Americans, and articulated some of the assumptions some people hold about Muslims. Shahejan, who is of Pakistani origin but was born and grew up in Boston, recalled that a good friend asked him on September 12, 2001 “What did your people do?” assuming that in some way because of his Pakistani or Muslim heritage, he was connected with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. About a year later, while in college, Shahejan’s roommate asked him, “Wouldn’t you agree that most of the problems in the world are caused by Muslims?” insinuating that he (the roommate) felt this way. Shocked and dismayed, Shahejan says he became offended but then began to question if his roommate was correct.

Basim told me about a trip to New York he took to visit a long time friend who was getting married. Her fiancé, an emergency medical technician who was at ground zero on 9/11, threatened Basim with a knife after he found out that Basim is a Pakistani American (the irony is that Basim was born in New York). Like Shahjehan, Basim also experienced surprising reactions from close friends. Basim recalled an incident with his former band mate and best friend, “...he got me into rock-n-roll and right after the towers went down, he was talking all sorts of shit about Muslims and I had no idea that he had those types of opinions. I had no idea any of my friends had those types of opinions. I

was reacting pretty emotionally to it...” These incidents convey some of the types of situations Muslim Americans faced in the United States after 9/11. Partially based on fear, these attitudes and assumptions also reflect the conflation of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle Eastern identities into a generalized Other associated with terrorism and violence.

Essentialized identities. In addition to straightforward discrimination, Muslim Americans often experience marginalization within U.S. society and are expected to justify or explain their religious beliefs (Nasir & Al-Almin, 2006). Muslim Americans often engage in impression management to dispel common stereotypes of Muslims (Nasir & Al-Almin, 2006). These stereotypes not only conflate Arab, Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern identities into a single profile (Naber, 2008a, 2008b), but also they essentialize Muslims as intrinsically violent and oppressive (Baker, 2003; Byng, 2008). Through the reproduction and legitimization of stereotypes and essentialized identities, assumptions are established that Muslims have certain innate and inherent characteristics (Byng, 2008; Naber, 2008b). Naber (2008b) argues that these essentialized identities of Muslims emerge from cultural and nation-based racism, and the result is an unfounded association between Muslims and violence and an assumption that these characteristics are natural to being Muslim.

The Chicago School’s conceptualizations of subcultures depended on a view of subcultures as deviant and permanent. More specifically, these conceptualizations

depended on the power of social labeling: the ability to label certain individuals as deviant (Gelder, 2005). The power of the subcultural label, of being acknowledged and defined as a subculture therefore depends upon the social and cultural norms of society. Researchers essentially viewed subcultures as sub-cultural, deviant, and based on circumstantial social situations (Gelder, 2005). The individuals I interviewed also expressed being labeled as deviant, not necessarily because of their punk identities, but because of their Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Arab identity. Interestingly, this power of social labeling, and the conflation of identities of Muslims, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and South Asians (and those perceived to be any of these categories) has created a vague and deviant Other within U.S. society. Naber (2008b) locates these essentialized identities and specifically the cultural and nation-based racism as partially resulting from the United States government's post 9/11 immigration policies and the racial profiling built into these policies.

An important aspect of such policies is the characterization by both the government and the media of Arabs or Muslims as not just the Other but also as "the enemy within." Several studies on the representation of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in the media found an enduring stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as violent and a threat to U.S. security (Alsultany, 2008; Baker, 2003; Joseph, D'Harlingue, & Ka Hin Wong, 2008). Joseph and colleagues (2008) argue that there is a powerful subtext in this representation of the Other: that an individual cannot be Arab or Muslim and

American at the same time, and “...by being both, one is neither and therefore not quite a citizen...the hyphen between Arab or Muslim and American is not quite attached...”

(p.230). The view that Arab or Muslim and American are mutually exclusive categories or identities certainly contributes to the Otherness experienced by Arab and Muslim Americans and assumes that if one is Arab or Muslim, they are therefore not a U.S. citizen (Byng, 2008; Joseph et al., 2008).

The post-9/11 crisis, an essentialized Muslim identity, and the view that Arab or Muslim and American identities are mutually exclusive have been used to justify racist views and practices toward Arabs and Muslims and to construct them as a “racialized enemy” (Alsultany, 2008, p. 228) against which the U.S. defines itself. Once an “enemy” was identified and defined as an actual and imposing threat, the media exploited and reproduced these images and attitudes, and the government advocated policy changes and security initiatives in the War on Terror. Identifying and defining all Muslims or Arabs as the “enemy” consisted of lumping together all Arabs and Muslims (both citizens and non-citizens) and associating them with an Islam that had been characterized as violent, evil, and threatening (Joseph et al., 2008). These studies illustrate the stereotypes faced by Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans, and also articulate the dual frustration and disparate identities faced by those involved with Taqwacore. Further, these stereotypes and identities have fueled the need for a community and a resistance to these stereotypes.

Islam

The people I interviewed also expressed a frustration with Islam, both in the United States and elsewhere, especially the more conservative interpretations of Islam and many of the strict religious rules. The emergence of a community in which to question Islam and develop one's own understanding and interpretation of Islam is central to Taqwacore. In contrast to countries in which Islam is the state religion, in the United States, Muslims have more of a choice about if and how they practice their faith. As Basim argued, "Islam is what you make of it. That's more possible over here, I think. In Pakistan or Iraq or some other country, (they) give you a definition of what Islam is and it's a 'yes-or-no' thing: you can't be conflicted about it." Taqwacore is in many ways questioning Islam itself and articulating this confliction or frustration with the traditional rules of Islam and the rigid concepts of acceptable behavior. Eyad spoke about the religious limitations and boundaries he perceives around being a Muslim: "When you're dealing with religion, you're sort of limited—what you can and can't do. If you step out of those boundaries, then guess what? You're not being a Muslim or a Muslim person anymore." For Eyad and others, Taqwacore is a way to "explore complexities" within themselves and to challenge and question the Muslim community.

Further, both Basim and Shahjehan expressed frustration and anger toward the Muslim community for not taking responsibility for or acknowledging its own problems, both in the United States and elsewhere. Shahjehan recalled an article he read in a

Muslim publication that reported that a house had been excavated and it was believed that the prophet Muhammad had lived there with his first wife, Ayesha. Saudi Arabian authorities became concerned that people would worship the actual house (in Islam idol worshipping is extremely blasphemous) and so they unexcavated the house and covered it up. In addition, according to Shahjehan, "...they had a public toilet spilled on top of it just to add insult to injury..." Shahjehan expressed frustration that this house had been covered up to prevent individuals from worshipping or even visiting it, and also because authorities then allowed a Hilton Hotel to be built in the same place. Basim also expressed conflicted feelings toward Islam, a culture and religion he grew up with. While he is inspired by and incorporates Quranic imagery into some of his songs, he is still frustrated with the Muslim community:

I still think Islam has a culture to it that I like in terms of music and poetry, but at the same time, that very same culture is being stamped out by Muslims in the name of Muslims...I don't see any of these pro-Palestinian activist Muslims speaking out about their own culture...no one wants to criticize what they see as their of group of people—it's kind of bullshit...

This frustration expressed by Basim and Shahjehan concerns the Muslim community's unwillingness to acknowledge or take responsibility for its actions. While both argue that certainly not all Muslims or Arabs are terrorists or violent, they also point out that there have been instances where Muslims have committed violent acts, yet the Muslim community as a whole does not want to acknowledge this or take a critical look at itself

and why these events occurred. Basim reiterated this point while discussing a bombing in Lahore, Pakistan, where he lived for several years and frequently visits:

I don't think all Muslims are terrorists. I don't think Islam is a violent religion. But I do think that Muslims *have to own up—we have to own up* to this ugliness that is true. Why is it that when people flip out and do violent things, they turn out to be Muslim? We have to own up and deal with this the same way that Germans dealt with Nazism....I feel that we also have to have some other kind of upheaval...That's the difference between opposing U.S. policy and sympathizing with terrorism, and I don't think that line has been drawn yet...

Frustration toward the U.S. and Islam

While frustration toward the United States and frustration toward Islam, separately, are expressions of what Taqwacore is, Taqwacore really can best be explained as a dual-frustration that these Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans faced due to their position between two cultures. Both the Chicago School and the CCCS framed their studies of subcultures and the individuals involved as existing in or experiencing a disjuncture between the individual's life and socially prescribed goals. Individuals either do not have access to the legitimate means to achieve these culturally-prescribed goals or they completely reject these goals, but in both situations, social strain or tension emerge within these individuals' lives. People develop alternative or innovative means to achieve culturally-prescribed goals when a disproportionate emphasis on these goals but not on the means to achieve them exists (Merton, 1938). Merton (1938) argued that the emphasis on certain culturally-prescribed goals, combined

with the inability to achieve these goals legitimately, creates a sense of frustration and “...the search for avenues of escape from a culturally intolerable situation...” (p. 680).

This social strain between two competing cultures or identities, or what Merton discussed as incompatible cultural demands, is one of the underlying motivations for the emergence of Taqwacore. Basim articulated this dual frustration he experienced:

I would get really really uneasy around my white friends after 9/11, once they began talking shit about Muslims...and I would be like... ‘Didn’t we grow up together?’ But then going to Pakistan and working as a journalist, my first assignment 3 years ago was to go to a dead house right after a bomb blew up outside the Lahore High Court killing 18 police men. I just was like, ‘This is religion?’

While oppositions to the war on Iraq have increased (Milbank & Deane, 2005), so too have negative perceptions of Islam (Deane & Fears, 2006), in particular an association of violence with Islam has increased (Nisbet & Shanahan, 2004). As Eyad pointed out, these negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims are still prevalent; even as recently as the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, “Barack Obama was being smeared because he might have been a Muslim or come from a Muslim family or that he’s secretly a Muslim.” Eyad goes on to talk about the construction of the Muslim identity that has occurred through the media, “...you’re a Muslim kid growing up and you think that you’re born and raised in this country—that you’re part of it. But at the same time, every day you watch the news, you’re seeing that it’s a bad thing to be a Muslim. And I don’t care *whatever* the times are, that’s unacceptable...”

Toufic also discussed the difficulties of growing up facing contradictory representations of Islam, “How do you be an American or Western in a society that is really intolerant of those cultures and their religion? (Islam) That makes up part of my identity. Growing up in this country it’s really not something you can run away from or avoid. Whether you like it or not, you’re living in this country as an Arab or a Muslim, and at the same time this country is at war with those countries (Arab and Muslim)...so it’s really difficult to navigate that contradiction...” Not only is there tension between the United States and Islamic cultures in the U.S., but also the externally constructed Muslim or Arab identity within the U.S. was pushed to forefront after 9/11 and marked by violence. Toufic stated, “...being a minority in any society is that you, not only do you face these obstacles (of being a minority), but even when it comes to your own identity, that’s something that you don’t have for yourself—it’s something that comes from somewhere else.”

As these individuals point out, the external construction of a Muslim or Arab identity associated with violence or terrorism did not just occur after 9/11 happened, but has been an on-going representation that these individuals (and others) have faced. Particularly frustrating has been the contradictory social forces either perpetuating these identities or negating them. As Basim and Toufic, among others, pointed out there is a contradiction or tension between these two cultural forces for young Muslim Americans, and Taqwacore has been one attempt to resolve this contradiction or resist both forces.

Eyad argued that especially after 9/11, many Muslims felt they had to defend their religious heritage and felt frustrated by how Muslims and Arabs were presented in mainstream U.S. society, while at the same time faced conflicts within the Muslim community. Toufic described this as an “identity crisis” resulting from the tension between “...being a Muslim living or growing up in the West, but also trying to connect with your heritage...”

Taqwacore is an expression of this dual conflict, or as Eyad put it, “...it was a two-front sort of struggle and Taqwacore was like ‘You know what? Enough’s enough. We are going to take this sledgehammer and smash it against the wall and shut everybody up’ and that’s what Taqwacore did.” Taqwacore has allowed individuals to express their struggles with both United States society and Islam, and to find a sense of community and support. Part of what makes this frustration, tension, or struggle so intense or personally difficult is that, according to those I interviewed, both of these identities or cultures (Islam and the United States) are essential aspects of who they are. They are not just identities that can be minimized or disregarded, but rather are aspects of their lives that they must reconcile. As Eyad stated, “I *have* to deal with Islam—I have to do that. I was raised by it; it was part of my upbringing.” At the same time, along with having to come to terms with Islam, Eyad also pointed out how Islamic culture, United States culture, his religious expression and feelings are, “...ways of thinking and *social*

constructions³. They're all interlinked. They're not in separate categories; they're constantly falling in and out of one another and Taqwacore allowed me to meld all these things together a bit better.” His statement emphasizes the identity conflict that emerges when being Muslim and being American are considered two mutually exclusive identity categories, when in fact these identities are intertwined. Taqwacore, then, has allowed these individuals to connect or reconcile these two identities that have been constructed separately.

According to The Chicago School, deviant subcultures emerge when individuals lack access to the legitimate means to achieve socially prescribed goals (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Why and how this inability existed for some people varied, but Cloward and Ohlin (1960) broadly described The Chicago School approach as “culture conflict theory” (p. 65). Specifically, there were two conceptualizations of the culture conflict theory. Miller (1958) claimed that individuals experienced external conflict between their own (usually lower class) culture and the mainstream culture, in that social goals and legitimate or legal behavior are determined by those of a different class. Thus, this class conflict (and the resulting deviant behavior) is built into the structure of society. Wirth (1930/1931), on the other hand, argued that this cultural clash occurs as an internal conflict where individuals, especially immigrants (or 1st generation Americans), internalize two conflicting cultures (home or traditional culture and U.S. culture), and

³ Interestingly, Eyad used sociological terminology when discussing these aspects of his identity.

experience tension between the two. In both instances, how certain individuals conceptualize legitimate means and behaviors are misaligned with how mainstream society defines legitimate means and behaviors, and thus a tension or strain develops due to this cultural conflict. This tension then leads individuals to develop alternative means, sometimes deviant or delinquent means, to achieve these goals or resolve cultural tensions (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

The group restructures its frame of reference and collectively develops new solutions to commonly faced problems. Thus, through continued interaction, the group forms a subculture, defines the group standards and values, and validates itself and the actions of the group (A. K. Cohen, 1955/2005). For these individuals, membership in a subculture functions as an alternative means to achieve legitimate goals, or allows these individuals to redefine their goals and values with the subculture functioning as a point of reference and validation. As these interactions continue over time, a “life-cycle” of deviant behavior emerges as subcultural members take on deviant careers (Gelder, 2005).

The Taqwacores, and those involved with Taqwacore, are not explicitly delinquent or criminal, although I would argue that they comprise a deviant subculture because of their simultaneous rejection of traditional Islam and mainstream U.S. values. Crucial to the emergence of Taqwacore is the external construction of these two cultures or identities as separate and incompatible and the resulting dual frustration toward this constructed incompatibility and the competing identities or cultures within these

individuals' lives. For those involved, Taqwacore has become the means through which they can express simultaneous involvement in and criticism toward both. The people involved with Taqwacore face somewhat contradictory social prescriptions and expectations from mainstream U.S. society and from their religious and ethnic traditions or heritage. As Merton (1938) argued, it is when people value culturally-prescribed goals that they develop alternative or innovative means to achieve them. Thus, people develop deviant subcultures because they value these goals but are denied the legitimate means to achieve them, in some instances because of conflicting cultural prescriptions and conceptions of legitimacy. In keeping with Merton's (1938) argument, the people involved with Taqwacore have developed innovative or alternative means because they face contradictory social expectations or prescriptions.

Reiterating Cloward and Ohlin (1960) and their critiques of The Chicago School, Taqwacore is a means to reconcile and express frustration toward the competing cultural influences in their lives. The Taqwacores also provide an example of how individuals can form a subculture that utilizes innovative means to develop a community and, in ways, reject socially prescribed identity constructions without becoming explicitly delinquent or criminal (one of the major criticisms of The Chicago School was that they did not account for non-delinquent subcultures; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960).

In terms of music subcultures, Becker (1963/2005) who was one of the first sociologists to explore musicians and their relationships not only to each other as

musicians, but also to their audience. According to Becker, an inherent conflict exists between musicians' conceptions of themselves and their conceptions of the audience that is articulated via their struggle between staying true to their artistic ideals, and thereby separating themselves from their audience, or "selling out" and playing commercial music to make money. Musicians who consistently face this dilemma often engage in self-segregating practices to "protect" and separate themselves from the audience. The musician exists in a unique position of valuing and working to maintain artistic freedom, thus alienating the audience, and facing commercial pressure to make mainstream music. In response to this tension between artistic freedom and commercial success, musicians engage in deviant behavior as self-segregating practices from the mainstream, and in doing so, legitimate themselves as a music subculture (Becker, 1963/2005).

Becker (1963/2005) also discovered a tension or strain between a specific subculture (jazz musicians) and mainstream society. As a result of this tension, Becker argues, musicians thus engage in self-segregating practices as protection. Taqwacores, and specifically those involved in Taqwacore bands, may engage in self-segregating practices, but more accurately, the construction of deviant labels has been the source of the segregation of Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Americans in the United States. Toufic illustrated this in his response to my question about having to explain his involvement in Taqwacore, "...Most people are scared of me so, (laughs)...Because people, you know, make their snap judgments—they just look at

you...and make assumptions, so I'm never really challenged or confronted. If anything, people sort of, you know, are put off by it. If people are put off by it, then they just avoid instead of confront or debate." While this is not a self-segregating practice, in ways, similar to the jazz musicians Becker studied, those involved with Taqwacore have experienced a tension between two cultures or value systems that have been socially constructed as incompatible.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEED FOR A COMMUNITY

In response to the need for a community, the individuals involved with Taqwacore have created a symbolic and social space, distinct from but influenced by the two identities or cultures within their lives and this dual frustration. A.P. Cohen's (1985) discussion of community as a symbolic phenomenon is useful in conceptualizing Taqwacore's emergence as a response to the need for a community. A. P. Cohen (1985, p. 19) stated,

It is that the community itself and everything within it, conceptual as well as material, has a symbolic dimension, and, further, that this dimension does not exist as some kind of consensus of sentiment. Rather, it exists as something for people 'to think with'. The symbols of community are mental constructs: they provide people with the means to make meaning. In so doing, they also provide them with the means to express the particular meaning which the community has for them.

Important in this conceptualization of community, is that it exists not as a structure or organization, but rather as a symbolic construction that allows people to preserve their individual interpretations and meanings, while at the same time provides a unifying theme or concept.

The personal changes cited by those involved in Taqwacore illustrated the need

for a community. Shahjehan commented: “I feel part of a community now, whereas before, I felt like alone on all these journeys...I didn’t necessarily think that I would ever really belong to anything...I’ve never really experienced that sense of connection before.” This community of friends has developed a trusting relationship in which to express their questions and conflections toward Islam and the United States. Basim pointed out, “I think we have a certain amount of trust amongst each other and I think that’s pretty cool.” This trust that has emerged among the Taqwacores is related to the small number of individuals involved. In response to my question that asked if community is important to Taqwacore, Basim responded,

I think so, because remember that no one else gives a shit about us. I mean, like the media like to cover us, but like when we played the show (South by Southwest) did that Iranian band stick around to see us play? Did that Palestinian hip hopper stick around and see us play? Did those hijabi rappers stick around and see us play? Did *Mark Levine* stick around and see us play? We’re mostly playing to each other.

In fact, I was at the particular show that Basim discussed and there was visible segregation between the Heavy Metal Islam bands and the Taqwacore bands. The Taqwacore bands interacted more as community, as all the individuals in Taqwacore bands knew each other, not just as musicians, but also as friends. Further, several Taqwacore bands shared musicians and supported each other as audience members. While the last Taqwacore band played (Vote Hezbollah), members from other Taqwacore bands rushed on stage and began singing and chanting the lyrics to the song “Muhammad

was a Punk Rocker.” In my observations at this show, this personal connection and support was absent from the Heavy Metal Islam bands.

Basim’s statement and the situation at South by Southwest emphasize what The Chicago School discussed in terms of individuals involved in a subculture redefining, legitimizing, and validating their values and identities through the community of the subculture. Additionally, as A.P. Cohen (1985) pointed out, communities have a symbolic quality and are created and exist within the minds of those involved. The individuals I interviewed described Taqwacore as an actual community of friends, but they also discussed the symbolic dimensions of Taqwacore in conceptualizing it as a unifying concept or idea. Important for the unifying aspects of Taqwacore is that involvement is not limited to individuals who are Muslim or involved with punk rock. Rather, Taqwacore is more broadly conceptualized as a system of support and friendship. Basim pointed out, “...It’s a little bit more complicated than what people think it is. I mean, a little bit of it is about power and like point of views and about new ideas, and we’re not trying to like push some form of Islam on people.” Shahjehan discussed Taqwacore as a group of friends as opposed to a scene, “It’s not necessarily a scene as much as it’s sort of a group of friends, of like-minded people who share some ideas with each other...a community of artists, writers, musicians, photographers, just friends really is the best way to describe it.”

This emphasizes the symbolic boundaries of Taqwacore. I view these symbolic boundaries as emerging from the dual frustration experienced by these individuals on two levels. First, there is the externally created symbolic boundary within U.S. society that insists that Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslim) are incompatible with U.S. identity and that the two categories are mutually exclusive. This external construction of identities has created a symbolic boundary around Taqwacore as it is described primarily in the media as Muslim punk rock. This symbolic boundary separates and distinguishes Taqwacore from mainstream U.S. society and from punk rock in general.

Secondly, the symbolic boundaries of Taqwacore are expressed by the individuals themselves. As Knight stated, "...it's neither Muslim not punk," and further, Marwan asked, "...how punk is it really? How Muslim is it?" Taqwacore is defined by those involved in contrast to pre-existing and externally constructed terms. Nonetheless, these individuals emphasize the symbolic boundaries of Taqwacore as not being so easily defined, and existing somewhere outside of these constructed identities. Again, the subjective and individual experience and interpretation of Taqwacore is an essential aspect of what Taqwacore is.

Creation of a Safe Space

Several people I interviewed referred to Taqwacore more abstractly, calling it a "space" (Basim, Marwan), a "blast of honesty" (Eyad), or a "flag" (Eyad). The concept of Taqwacore as a safe space for those involved reiterates the element of sharing ideas

and thoughts openly. As Marwan stated, “Taqwacore gives a space for people who don’t identify with mainstream Islam or even the mainstream of punk rock; just to feel like there’s this space for me. It creates a safe space for them to be themselves that doesn’t feel outside.”

Further, Eyad, in reflecting on what has changed in his life since becoming involved in Taqwacore stated, “I’ve found sort of a place to be safe in”. This emphasizes the creation of a social space in which these individuals can “safely” explore and discuss ideas. In fact, it seems that this access to open and uncensored expression is more the epicenter of Taqwacore than the music or musical style: “...it’s about the ideas being shared versus just a sound that Muslim artists are performing” (Eyad). Although Eyad describes them as Muslim artists, Basim is quick to emphasize that Taqwacore as a whole (especially The Kominas) do not endorse Islam, but rather use their songs and lyrics to articulate frustrations with both the United States and Islam. As a “flag”, Taqwacore has created a name or symbol for individuals experiencing similar emotions, thoughts, frustrations, and ideas. Often cited is that Taqwacore and the individuals involved are not the first group to express these frustrations, that “...things that are similar but a different name were emerging anyway...” (Basim) and that “Taqwacore just gave it a word” (Eyad). These descriptions emphasize Taqwacore as a symbolically constructed community.

Communities exist within symbolic boundaries that are often constructed through opposition or contrast (A. P. Cohen, 1985). Basim discussed Taqwacore in terms of vocabulary or language, specifically in contrast to established vocabularies:

What Taqwacore means to me is...a space where you're withdrawing from a vocabulary. That could be my Pakistani vocabulary, the vocabulary of being brought up as a Sunni, the vocabulary of being into punk. These like three intersections of either culture—Pakistani culture, racial awareness, or when it comes to religion, I'm kind of at odds with religion...I think it's an intersection those three things for me personally, that's what it is...

For Basim, Taqwacore is a space that escapes from the vocabulary of religious, ethnic, and punk cultures. Similar to the conceptualization of Taqwacore as a safe space, Basim pointed out that Taqwacore can be a space for him to withdraw from the cultural boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and even punk rock. Similarly, A. P. Cohen (1985) argued that communities exist relationally and individuals define themselves in opposition or contrast to a “significant other” (p. 114). Thus, communities construct symbolic boundaries that define what the community is and is not. In ways, then, Taqwacore is symbolically rebelling against these cultural “vocabularies” by creating a space where individuals can express disparities within their lives, however, they are also working to change thoughts and opinions and have developed a very real community.

As a fluid and subjective concept, Taqwacore allows individuals to develop their own interpretations and meanings for what Taqwacore is. A. P. Cohen (1985) pointed out that this is possible precisely because of the symbolic dimensions of community.

When discussing symbolic categories, A. P. Cohen pointed out that certain social categories or concepts have ambiguous or elusive meanings and thus primarily exist within symbolic boundaries. Two examples he provided are the concepts of justice or patriotism. A. P. Cohen argued that the range of meanings associated with each concept are “glossed over in a commonly accepted symbol,” (p. 15) and in doing so, allows individual meanings to be attached. Those I interviewed discussed Taqwacore in similar ways, abstractly as a social space or an idea. In addition, the emphasis on the subjective nature of Taqwacore allows individuals to determine for themselves what Taqwacore means, while at the same time maintain allegiance to Taqwacore as a symbolic community.

No matter how ambiguous or individually defined it is, creating and implementing a word, “Taqwacore”, has socially and psychologically created a safe haven for a specific group of individuals “who can be complicated in their relationships...” with religion, society, and politics (Marwan). By creating a safe space, loosely encompassed in “Taqwacore”, based on sharing opinions and ideas, Taqwacore has also been characterized as a form of honesty. Perhaps because it allows people to be complicated, it allows them to safely and honestly express the multiple and often disparate qualities of their lives. In creating a name, concept, or flag, or in escaping from the established cultural vocabulary, a more concrete social space has emerged.

Identity Development

In addition to the conceptualization of a community as a symbolic entity manifested in the minds of its members is the focus on the development of individual identity in relation to the community (A.P. Cohen, 1985). A. P. Cohen (1985) argued that ethnic or local communities are more than an expression of contrast from other groups and that there exists additionally a feeling of disadvantage. Communities exist and succeed because the individuals involved personally identify with the community more than they do with other groups or identities. A. P. Cohen stated, “The suggestion is, then, that people assert community whether in the form of ethnicity or of locality, when they recognize in it the most adequate medium for the expression of their whole selves.” (p. 107).

As a community, Taqwacore not only exists as a concept or a social space, but also as a means of identity development for the individuals involved. Giving Taqwacore a name and associating with Taqwacore has helped some members more clearly articulate their identities and become more confident in who they are and in expressing themselves. Prior to involvement in Taqwacore, several individuals not only cited feelings of not belonging or of being different, but also expressed a conflicted sense of identity, characterized by a tension between United States culture or society and Islamic culture. In fact, A. P. Cohen (1985) argued that individual identity is shaped by contrast. For those involved with Taqwacore, however, this contrast is two-fold. As a result, these

individuals have cited feelings of alienation and self questioning, similar to the feelings of African Americans that Du Bois (1903/1982) discussed: “But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate” (p. 10).

Through Taqwacore, these individuals have created a community in which to express frustration, challenge stereotypes, and resolve these identity issues. For those I interviewed, part of coming to terms with or resolving this dual frustration through Taqwacore resulted in increased self-confidence and self-acceptance. As Eyad stated, “I’m more confident and accepting of who I am. I don’t see myself as something that’s wrong or bad. I’ve found a place to be safe in. I’m very comfortable with this world now...it’s (Taqwacore) allowed me to be free in my feelings and expression.” Closely linked with this feeling of self-confidence is the ability to be open and honest and to have a supportive community in which to do this. Shahjehan noted, “What’s changed is just you kinda have a sense that I’m alright, basically I’m alright and I’ll *be* alright and I’ve got a group of friends who’ll help me with these questions that I’ve been having—help me feel like part of a community.” This sense of community has allowed these individuals to redefine their personal standards of acceptable behavior and feel confident in expressing these because they have a group that reaffirms and validates their sense of self and identity.

Basim pointed out that his involvement in Taqwacore has helped him develop a stronger identity, due in part to this sense of belonging to a community of similar and like-minded individuals, “I have a much better sense of identity, I think, than I did before. Before I felt like I was, no matter how you cut it, playing white people’s music to white people...I didn’t really feel that it was my culture and now I feel like this is my culture.” Basim’s statement points to one of the way that membership in a community strengthens individual identity. By emphasizing and reinforcing the symbolic boundaries of the community, a more clear definition of the community emerges. In being a member of a community, individuals thus view themselves in relation to these symbolic boundaries and define their identities along these boundaries.

Again, those I interviewed stressed the importance of Taqwacore in their lives as an expression of honesty about their Muslim and American identities and the reassurance they found in sharing these experiences and thoughts with people who have experienced similar situations. These individuals noted feeling a more complete or connected sense of identity in that Taqwacore has allowed them to bring together two opposing aspects of their identities and at the same time, be confident in challenging each one. Eyad discussed bringing these two identities together through Taqwacore, “The Taqwacores was like, I don’t have to put it (religion) on a shelf, I can still call myself Muslim, I can drink, I can date, be in relationships, you know, have sexual relationships outside of marriage and still feel ok calling myself a Muslim and Taqwacore allowed me to do that.”

This further emphasizes how Taqwacore has served as a space to redefine acceptable standards of behavior, restructure symbolic boundaries, and as a source of affirmation.

The changes that people have experienced since becoming involved with Taqwacore primarily involve a greater sense of community, having “more friends” (Toufic), or a group of people who understand, support and encourage each other artistically and personally. This reflects what Taqwacore is and how it has emerged. Contrary to being primarily a music genre, most of the individuals I spoke with characterized it as a community, a group of friends, an expression of honesty, or the creation of a “safe space”. Similarly, the benefits or changes that individuals cite as particularly meaningful to them since being involved in Taqwacore revolve around this sense of community, friendship, and open expression of their identities and the dual frustration they feel.

Important in the conceptualization of Taqwacore as a community are the symbolic boundaries used to distinguish Taqwacore as a social space. A. P. Cohen (1985) argued that these boundaries are defined in opposition or in contrast to an Other, as a means of distinguishing the community. Further, A. P. Cohen argued that this contrast or distinction defines the symbolic boundaries of community and individuals define themselves in terms of these boundaries. For Taqwacore, the symbolic boundaries are rooted in their resistance. These feelings of resistance, coupled with the need for a social space, encouraged Taqwacore to emerge.

Feelings of Resistance

While certain subcultural scholars have argued that subcultures are involved in symbolic resistance to the social structure (CCCS) and some current scholars claim that the post-modern condition invalidates meaningful subversion or resistance, I think Taqwacore is an actual resistance to the essentialized identities and dual frustration these individuals have faced. Other current scholars argue that post-subcultural theory overlooks the deep and important meanings that subcultures can and do have for people. Specifically, these researchers assert that the early conceptions of subcultures are relevant for current analyses, especially the CCCS's focus on symbolic resistance to social class (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006; Williams, 2007). Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) argue that class divisions and social structure still influence subcultures and individuals involvement in subcultures. Further, Haenfler (2004) utilizes a social resistance perspective (similar to that of the CCCS) in his ethnographic study of the straightedge subculture, citing resistance on micro-, meso-, and macro-levels that straightedgers use to create not only an individual identity, but also a collective identity as a subculture.

It is through feelings and expressions of resistance that individuals involved with Taqwacore have developed a supportive community. These feelings and expressions of resistance are related to the dual frustration toward the U.S. and Islam and rooted in the post-9/11 U.S. context. As a challenge to common stereotypes, Taqwacore aims to encourage a more humanizing attitude in the United States toward Muslims and Arabs.

Instead of associating Islam and Muslims with violence and terrorism, Taqwacore works to change people's attitudes and emphasize that "...we're just human beings..." (Eyad). Taqwacore has also resisted or contradicted the association of the Islamic world with a rejection of modernity and technology by utilizing current technology to build a community and distribute their music. Important in the ability to challenge and dispel stereotypes and express frustrations is a community or a network of supportive individuals. As those I interviewed stated, before Taqwacore, they felt alone and conflicted, yet now that a community or subculture is emerging, they feel more confident in expressing their identities and in challenging or resisting social and religious norms.

Several recent studies have examined subcultures that have synthesized multiple cultural identifications as a form of resistance and developed meaningful communities. Huq (2006) examined British Asian underground music and French hip-hop within the respective social contexts in which they emerged. Similar to earlier CCCS studies, Huq studied second-generation immigrants and how they have combined multiple cultural influences (specifically "home" or traditional culture and global or western music culture) into a meaningful personal and collective identity. Feixa (2006) compared the punk subcultures in Mexico and Spain, noting how in both countries the subcultures combined a global or transnational culture with the local culture, specifically, local social problems and class divisions, to create a unique punk rock subculture. Feixa explores how these individuals have transformed their marginalization from a stigma into a

subcultural identity of solidarity and resistance through a punk rock subculture. Both subcultures that Feixa discusses have synthesized global music cultures with local issues and situations and have created communities of resistance that are meaningful and relevant to their members. Similarly, Taqwacore has worked to transform the stereotypes and stigmas associated with Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans by creating a resistant community with a punk rock attitude.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROLE OF PUNK ROCK

Although I have argued that the conceptualization of Taqwacore as a genre of Muslim punk rock is not an accurate or complete characterization of Taqwacore, I do think the underlying ethos and influence of punk rock, as a traditionally resistant and rebellious subculture that has its origins the United States, has been very influential in how Taqwacore has emerged and what Taqwacore encompasses. The emergence of Taqwacore depends on the existence and traditions of punk rock in the United States as a form of social resistance. Further, Knight's initial conceptualization of Taqwacore was a punk movement or subculture of Muslims. As I illustrated previously, the novel has been crucial, in fact the foundation, upon which the real Taqwacore community has developed. Not all of the Taqwacore bands play punk rock, and not all of the individuals involved with Taqwacore fit the traditional punk style, however, punk rock attitudes, ethos, and motivations are very important to Taqwacore. Taqwacore's emergence as a subculture not only depends on the U.S. context, dual frustration, need for community, and resistance, but also upon the historical traditions of punk rock for its DIY ethic, resistant and rebellious attitude, re-appropriations of signs and symbols, and shock value.

Punk rock has traditionally been a subculture deeply involved in asserting its

marginalization and embracing its Other or outsider status (McNeil & McCain, 1997; Moore, 2004). Although most of the people I interviewed acknowledged that Taqwacore encompasses more music genres than punk rock, there was also an emphasis on the importance of punk conceptually to Taqwacore. Toufic pointed out, “I think it’s (punk rock) essential, but it’s not all—I don’t think that it’s limited to punk. So I think it’s essential, but there are other genres, like hip hop...and I would include them under that banner (of Taqwacore).”

Traditions and Attitudes

Punk rock developed in the United States and The United Kingdom in the mid-1970s partially as a response to the alienation and commercialization of mainstream rock music at the time and to the social movements of the 1960’s (McNeil & McCain, 1997; Moore, 2004). Punk rockers specifically objected to the mass profiteering of popular bands at the time, the physical separation between audience and performer, and what they viewed as worn out peace movements of the 1960’s (Moore, 2004). Researchers have also discussed punk rock in terms of its ability to break down the barriers between the audience and the performer (Davies, 2005; Moore, 2007). Punk rock tends to go beyond simply engaging the audience to demand the audience’s participation in the performance or show. Punk developed as a reaction to the “stadium rock” of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s (concerts often took place in large arenas or stadiums), in which the sheer distance

between the audience and the performers created a distinct separation or alienation between the band and the audience.

Particularly salient for those involved with Taqwacore is this communal aspect of punk rock and the lack of barriers between the performer and the audience that typified early punk rock. As Shahjehan stated, “Yeah, it’s (punk rock) a very important part of the whole thing (Taqwacore). It’s just like—musicians playing for themselves and being each other’s audience...and it’s a totally different experience to be able to—I don’t know, crash into the guitar player of the band.” Shahjehan expanded on the interaction between performer and audience that is typical of punk rock:

Punk music is seen as like—the audience is as much a part of the performance as the performers, and so it’s about yelling and chanting and moshing—like having a band in your face is something that’s different from other styles of music. I mean, you wouldn’t necessarily get that same connection at a jazz show. Like at a big stadium gig you wouldn’t get the same connection...so that’s probably the appeal of punk—that was the appeal to me.

A large part of this break down of barriers in punk rock is rooted in its DIY ethic. For example, punk’s simplistic musical style allows just about anyone to start a punk band (Davies, 2005). Punk rock subcultures have traditionally used DIY fanzines, such as *Punk Magazine*, independent record labels, and homemade t-shirts and records/CD’s to spread their music and develop a community. This is a tradition that continues today in modern punk subcultures (Davies, 2005; Moore, 2007; O’Connor, 2002, 2003). The emphasis on and expectation of DIY in punk rock allows and encourages anyone to

participate in the subculture (Davies, 2005; Moore, 2007). Davies (2005) argues that punk rock is perhaps even more accessible today, due in part to its transnational scope and the mass appeal and accessibility of its aesthetics.

Punk's musical style is loud and fast and characterized by a DIY ethic (applied to the performance and production of music and also clothing and style), and a rejection of mainstream society and norms (Davies, 2005; Moore, 2007). Another very important and essential aspect of Taqwacore has its roots specifically in punk rock. As Shahjehan pointed out, "I think one thing specifically about punk, I would say it's sort of that 'anybody can do it' type of thing. It's not like putting on some proper show..."

Taqwacore does seem to have embraced that "anybody can do it" and the "do-it-yourself" attitudes. I think this is related to the fluid and subjective definition of Taqwacore; that is, individuals involved can decide for themselves what Taqwacore means to them and become involved musically or artistically or in any way they want. While Taqwacore, as an expression, articulates the frustrations specific to individuals who are (or are perceived to be) Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Arab Americans, at the same time, they define themselves as "an unassuming club that doesn't really have any rules to it...it's very welcoming..." (Shahjehan). This welcoming attitude reflects the idea that anyone can do it, this "safe space" (Marwan) is one that is not distinctly defined, but open for other "like-minded" individuals (Shahjehan). In fact, Eyad does not refer to himself as a Taqwacore. His reasons for not identifying himself as Taqwacore were that specifically

identifying himself or anyone else as Taqwacore would create a standard of comparison or definition of Taqwacore. For Eyad, this would contradict Taqwacore's indefinable quality, further emphasizing the subjectivity and openness of Taqwacore.

More specifically, according to those I interviewed, some of the same motivations that influenced early punk subcultures seem to be applicable to or similar to the underlying motivations for Taqwacore, despite the various musical styles. Shahjehan described the appeal of punk rock, "Punk and the show—the whole communal aspect of it and the...anti-authoritarian, kind of like, living life the way you want and sort of saying outlandish things. It seemed like, especially in these past few years, like it was something we could apply to Islam."

The early punk rock subculture has been described as a negation of social norms, focused on deconstructing signs and symbols, and eliciting shocking responses, similar to Taqwacore bands' albums, artwork, lyrics, and characterization as Muslim punk rockers. The second wave of punk rock (that emerged in the 1980s) has often been described as rooted in authenticity, or creating authentic identities by employing alternative media, do-it-yourself projects, and a resistance to social norms and values (Moore, 2004). Again, Taqwacore is not just a shocking symbolic rebellion, but employs alternative media, DIY methods in their shows, art, and music, and has forged an authentic identity and community based on resistance. The first wave of punk rock is often described as hedonistic, in negation of everything, and who saw no chance for social improvement,

clearly espoused by the recurring phrase “No Future” in the Sex Pistols song “God Save the Queen” (Moore, 2004) and embodied by bands such as The Ramones and Richard Hell and the Voidoids. The second wave of punk rock tended to be more politically involved (Moore, 2004), focused on community improvement (O’Connor, 2002), included bands such as The Minutemen, Minor Threat, and Bad Brains, and influenced the emergence of a straightedge subculture that advocated abstaining from drugs, sex, and alcohol.

Although The Kominas parody The Sex Pistols lyrics in changing, “I am an anarchist—I am the anti-Christ” to “I am an Islamist—I am the anti-Christ” (“Sharia Law in the USA”, The Kominas), Taqwacore does not particularly espouse the hedonistic or anarchistic values of the earlier punk subcultures. They are more community oriented and socially and politically aware; however, they are not specifically straightedge. Taqwacore is almost a combination of these two previous punk subcultures, focused on resistance and community, and a rebellion against two cultures or identities.

Taqwacore, in how it is conceptualized by the media and in its role as an expression of dual frustration with Islamic and U.S. cultures, is in many ways a punk rock subculture or movement. The media’s focus on Taqwacore as almost a spectacle, as Muslim punk rock, and the adverse reactions some individuals have experienced in regard to this label, illustrate not only Taqwacore’s rebellion and expression of frustration, but also the shocking nature of Taqwacore to some. Taqwacore is a punk

subculture, not necessarily in its sound entirely, but at a more conceptual level of what Taqwacore expresses and how they express it.

Toufic, who has been involved in leftist activism and who grew up listening to and appreciating punk rock, definitely views an important connection between Taqwacore and punk rock, beyond just a definition of what Taqwacore is, in the resistant and rebellious attitudes and the sometimes shocking images and lyrics Taqwacore bands have utilized. Toufic also discussed Taqwacore and its conceptual relationship with punk rock, particularly in terms of its role as an expression of rebellion and frustration, “The sentiment and the appeal of punk music, you know, has historically always been anti-authoritarian or anti-establishment or, you know, an expression of alienation or rebellion...I think that punk music is an expression of rebellion, so it’s a political expression, whether we like it or not, that’s what it is.”

Toufic further pointed out the connection between punk rock and social awareness and resistance, “I know there are a lot of people who want to divorce punk music from its radical roots, from its origins in the working class neighborhoods in Britain and New York...I think there’s definitely a connection with punk music and leftist activism.” In fact, Marwan told me about his involvement in activism and specifically the anarcho-punk movement prior to Taqwacore. For Marwan, his involvement in Taqwacore results more from his awareness of and frustration with social

issues or problems in the United States. He has used Taqwacore as a platform to express his frustration with living in the duality of United States and Arab cultures.

Although over the years, some punk rock has detached itself from social or political activism (Traber, 2001), punk traditionally has its roots in social resistance and rebellion, coupled with feelings of hopelessness and a lack of control (Moore, 2004). While the specific issues that are the source of frustration are different, Taqwacore and traditional or early punk subcultures parallel each other in their frustration with the status quo, a lost sense of control, and a resistance to what society is telling them they should be and do.

Shock Effects

Another common feature of punk rock is its ability to shock, not just mainstream society, but also the audience. Laing (1985) argues that this shock emerges as a response to punk bringing in new discourses or topics absent from popular music (e.g. sex, violence, obscenity, and death). Traditionally, Punk's style and anarchistic attitude aid in its shock value. Often this shock has occurred as a re-appropriation of signs or symbols with different meanings, for example, the swastika has been re-appropriated by various punk bands with diverse meanings and intentions.

Post-subculturalists argue that the constant exposure to multiple identities and symbols negates any actual resistance that subcultures attempt to engage in (Weinzierl &

Muggleton, 2003). Further, due to this vast commercialization, post-subculturalists argue that, "...the potential for style itself to resist appears largely lost, with any 'intrinsically' subversive quality to subcultures exposed as an illusion" (p. 5, Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). Post-subculturalists argue that their perspectives are extensions of CCCS theories because of their focus on the importance of signs and symbols. They argue, however, that in post-modernity, signs and symbols constantly shift meanings and reference only other signs and symbols, and therefore, hold no real, tangible value. Whereas previously, subcultural members were able to engage in social resistance by re-appropriating signs and symbols in a shocking way, due to the post-modern condition, re-appropriation is no longer a form of rebellion or resistance to the social condition (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003).

Taqwacore bands, however, have elicited shock from audience members or outsiders. For example, the 2007 Taqwa-Tour tour wrapped up in Chicago as five bands (The Kominas, Al-Thawra, Vote Hezbollah, Secret Trial Five, and Diacritical) attempted to perform at the Islamic Society of North America's annual meeting. The first band to play at the conference's youth-run open mic night was the all-female Canadian Muslim band Secret Trial Five. This performance did not go over well with the conference organizers who called the local police to have the open mic night shut down. As the police told the bands to exit the stage, audience members began to yell, "Let them Play!" while organizers of the conference clearly expressed that such music, especially with

female vocalists, would not be allowed. At the same time, members of the Taqwacore bands, led by Knight, began chanting, “Pigs are haram (forbidden) in Islam!” making reference to the police as pigs and to the fact that pork is forbidden in Islam. The Taqwacore bands left the stage to avoid being arrested but soon after reconvened outside the convention center and smashed a guitar on the sidewalk.

The incident in Chicago illustrates several points. First, that Taqwacores exist in a very marginalized position. That is, the Muslim community does not fully accept who they are or what they do (although many of the youth in the audience enjoyed the music). Further, interruption of the show by the police symbolically illustrates the external or outside control exerted by the U.S. over the conceptualization of Islam and the Muslim identity. This incident also illustrated that the Muslim American community itself is not cohesive. Nonetheless, quite a few of the youth in the audience enjoyed the music and supported Taqwacore, further illustrating the potential ability of Taqwacore to develop a larger community within the United States.

One song by The Kominas discusses the Prophet Muhammad having sex, and their album artwork would be considered blasphemous by most Muslims. Their cover of their album, “Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay” depicts a woman wearing a burqa that has been blown away from her body, only covering her face, and underneath she is wearing only a tank top and holding a machine gun. Even several of the bands’ names bring doubt to their Muslim affiliations. Al-Thawra translates to “The Revolution” and

The Kominas translates to “The Bastards.” The band Vote Hezbollah, while taking its name directly from the novel, also references an organization the U.S. government has classified as a terrorist group. As I discussed earlier, The Kominas have re-appropriated the opening line of a classic punk song by the Sex Pistols and changed “anarchist” to “Islamist.” Several other song titles could be considered quite shocking: “Suicide Bomb the Gap” (The Kominas), “Hey Hey Hey Guantanamo Bay!” (Secret Trial Five), and “Muhammad was a Punk Rocker” (originally a poem published in the novel; turned into a song by Vote Hezbollah). While some of the songs are meant to be sarcastic and shocking, others do offer social and political critiques of both the United States and Islam.

Punk Rock Out of Context

Punk rock itself is a marginalizing identity, in its open resistance to social norms and values. Punk traditionally embraces the identity of the other, whether or not this identity is one that has been chosen, as is often the case with white punk rockers, or has been imposed upon these individuals, in the case of African Americans or minorities. Those involved in a punk subculture willingly take on this marginalized identity and separate themselves through their defiant attitudes, style, and behavior. The self-marginalization that individuals in the punk subculture engage in becomes more complicated when, as is the case for Taqwacores and African American punks, race or ethnicity becomes a further point of marginalization (Ramírez-Sánchez, 2008; Traber,

2001). Multiple layers of marginalization therefore exist: punk marginalization from mainstream society, marginalization that African Americans (or other minorities) face from society, and often marginalization that these racial or ethnic minorities experience within the subculture itself (Ramírez-Sánchez, 2008; Traber, 2001). Historically, the punk subculture has been a subculture dominated by middle class, white males, and the appropriation of punk rock by white supremacist groups further characterized punk rock as a white subculture. Nonetheless, there are instances of African American punk bands, like Bad Brains, female-led punk bands, like Bikini Kill, and Latino/a punk bands, such as Los Illegals.

Basim articulated an interesting point about punk rock historically being a white dominated subculture and punk rock as a medium of expression:

Sometimes I feel that punk is a perfect medium and other times, I see that it falls a little short because a lot of people have preconceptions. I mean, it's weird, I used to play with a lot of white kids, lots of music, all types of music—all types of music under the sun, but as soon as I began asserting my Pakistani identity, they were like “your music”. As soon as I began writing with The Kominas, playing with Shahj (Shahjehan) and the other guys, a lot of these white kids took it almost as hostility.

Ramírez-Sánchez (2008) offers one of the few analyses of African Americans' involvement in the punk subculture, and specifically examines the various levels of marginalization African Americans face within and outside of the punk subculture. Ramirez-Sanchez draws mostly from the documentary *Afropunk*, directed by James Spooner, which explores African Americans' involvement in the punk subculture and

specifically how issues of race and marginalization have influenced these individuals' involvement in punk rock. When asked "What is punk?" one interviewee responded, "Being caught in a system that you can't identify with; that you don't support and like. Just being contrary, that's the true energy of what punk is" (Spooner, 2003). Many of the people interviewed for the documentary described punk as a lifestyle or a way of living, and as much more than just a style of music or attitude. Further, many of those interviewed in the documentary cited feelings of alienation and not fitting in because they are Black as primary reasons they became involved in the punk subculture. The energy and anger characteristic of punk rock music was an appealing aspect of the subculture and proved to be an effective venue for these youth to vent frustrations (Spooner, 2003).

Punk rock helped these African Americans negotiate not fitting into traditional African American identities (Spooner, 2003). At the same time, however, they did not fit into traditional punk rock identities of white and middle class, either. Often these African Americans experienced multiple levels of marginalization: from society for being a minority and a punk rocker, from the subculture, again for being a minority, and from other African Americans, for not "being Black enough" (Spooner, 2003).

Basim articulated similar sentiments, "Before, I felt like I was, no matter how you cut it, playing white people's music to white people. I mean, I love the music but...I didn't really feel that it was my culture, no matter how I cut it. And now, I feel like this is my culture." Basim's statements about punk being a traditionally white subculture or

genre of music highlight two important points. First, the dual frustration toward both Islamic and U.S. cultures that individuals I interviewed expressed earlier extends musically. Even a music subculture like punk rock, that willingly embraces a marginalized or Other social position, felt uneasy and expressed hostility toward Basim for expressing his ethnic heritage. Secondly, Basim's statements conceptualize Taqwacore as a re-appropriation of punk rock (both musically and in attitude) within a different context, or characterized by a different context. To further illustrate the idea of Taqwacore as a re-appropriation of punk rock, Basim stated, "I always thought punk was white music...There was this little bit of strange kind of nationalism, maybe where it was like, maybe this (Taqwacore) can be mine."

Hebdige (1979/2004) began to explore how and why these multiple levels of marginalization occur in his discussion of the appropriation of minority or immigrant styles into predominantly white subcultures. Specifically, he examined the influence of West Indian and Jamaican immigrants in England on the style and music of the subcultures at the time. He looked at the appropriation of traditional musical styles (e.g., reggae and ska) by children of immigrants to England (e.g., British Caribbeans) as a means of resistance to the inferior and narrow status imposed upon them. In similar ways, Taqwacore has combined Islamic or ethnic traditions of music and culture with punk rock as a resistance to the narrowly defined identities placed upon them by U.S. society or Islamic culture.

Hebdige (1979/2004) further argued that subcultural appropriation of specific music styles, such as punk fused with reggae, reflects broader structural and social patterns of assimilation or rejection of immigrant populations in general. Hebdige provides one of the first discussions of the race and ethnic relations between immigrants and white subcultures. While Hebdige argues that the white subcultural appropriation of the Other reflects broader structural patterns that have symbolically integrated the Other, he also argues that this integration of immigrant style and music act as a “present absence” in that the true interaction between the white subculture and the immigrant culture from which it has appropriated its style is actually quite limited (if at all; p. 68). Hebdige describes this present absence as a type of black hole around which the subculture exists, and that it is actually the idea of the Other and not necessarily interaction or accommodation of the Other that motivates them. Both the experiences of those involved with Afropunk and Taqwacore illustrate the persisting marginalization within punk subcultures, despite its appropriation of the Other or a marginalized identity.

While punk rock has tended to be a primarily white subculture, there are punk bands in the United States that have embraced their ethnic heritage. Basim said that these bands were influential for him (although they are white): “Long before I read the book (The Taqwacores), I wanted to have an all Pakistani punk band, but in the vein of a lot of the Irish punk bands, the Irish ska bands in Boston. I’m not even a big fan of that style,

but I just thought it would be a cool way to have culture and counterculture mismatched, you know?”

Taqwacore and Afropunk have utilized punk rock as a form of expressing their marginalization. Specific to Taqwacore and Afropunk, unlike white punks who choose a marginalized identity, these groups already exist within a marginalized position. Studies of non-Western punk subcultures have argued that punk rock, as an idea, style, and subculture surpasses national, racial, and ethnic boundaries, yet is often used as a means of social resistance or rebellion in very different contexts with often very different social meanings. In some situations, local punk subcultures very openly resist social and political situations (e.g. Mexico, Feixa, 2006) and in other situations, such as the punk subculture in Iran (Shahabi, 2006), the punk style is considerably muted and less (if at all) overtly politically resistant. In both situations, however, being labeled as or identifying oneself as a punk has had political consequences and meaning not just within the subculture but also within society.

Interestingly, there seems to be an intertwining thread of identity and community building, embracing of a marginal or minority identity, and a play on or distortion of traditional symbols within these punk subcultures. Taqwacore is similar to non-Western punk subcultures in its re-appropriation of forms of resistance that are localized to their own issues.

So while the music of Taqwacore may not all be classified as punk rock, punk does play an important role in the conceptualization of Taqwacore. Taqwacore, as an expression of a dual frustration, a resistance to two competing cultural influences, and in many ways, a rebellion against both, has embraced a punk rock attitude and ethos. Through their multiple levels of marginalization, coupled with their fusion of traditional punk rock signs and symbols with an Islamic context, Taqwacore has developed a unique subculture of punk rock, as a form of resistance specific to their own frustrations. In addition, the welcoming and open aspects and the lack of a clear definition of Taqwacore lend themselves to a particularly DIY subculture or community, in which just about “anybody can do it” or get involved. The emphasis on a community of like-minded individuals, facing similar struggles, articulating similar frustrations add to the DIY and communal aspects of Taqwacore as a punk rock subculture. I view Taqwacore’s appropriation of punk rock as a means of mediating this dual frustration or identity conflict. In developing a symbolic community or subculture rooted in punk rock, Taqwacore has mediated the tension or strain between the two conflicting identity constructions in which these individuals exist.

Hebdige (1979/2004), in writing about the punk rock subculture of the 1970s in England, noted that unlike other subcultures of the time, punk was an amalgam. Punk borrowed from other subcultures and re-appropriated signs and symbols with new and often shocking meanings, creating “beautifully broken codes” (p. 26). Hebdige states,

“The unlikely alliance of diverse and superficially incompatible musical traditions, mysteriously accompanied under punk, found ratification in an equally eclectic clothing style which reproduced the same kind of cacophony on the visual level.” (p. 26) Further, Hebdige stated:

It seems entirely appropriate that punk’s ‘unnatural’ synthesis should have hit the London streets during that bizarre summer. Apocalypse was in the air and the rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change. Indeed, even punk’s epiphanies were hybrid affairs, representing the awkward and unsteady confluence of two radically dissimilar languages of reggae and rock.” (p. 27)

Hebdige (1979/2004) emphasized the hybridity of punk rock and the various sources from which it borrowed that inherently created punk rock as a contradiction. While not all of the individuals involved with Taqwacore themselves are a “cacophony on the visual level,” (p. 26) as traditional punks were, they have synthesized at least two seemingly very different identities. True to the traditions of punk rock, the concept of a Muslim punk or a punk Muslim in itself encompasses “radically dissimilar” ideas.

Taqwacore, in addition to be described as a social space, a feeling of frustration, or a form of honesty, has also been described as a concept, or in the words of Marwan, an “identity concept” that has allowed these individuals to bring together two previously compartmentalized identities. Eyad referred to Taqwacore as “a missing link” that connected what individuals described as disjointed or fragmented aspects of their lives. For a few, their religious identity “had been put on a shelf” (Eyad), so to speak, due to the

guilt and frustration they felt toward religion and specifically toward not fitting into a pre-determined or pre-defined concept of Muslim. Taqwacore allows these individuals to question, challenge, and “be alright” (Shahejan) with not having all the answers.

The sense of community, identity, and trust among this group of like-minded people, illustrates that they are, in a sense, reconciling disparate aspects of their lives. While caught between U.S. culture and Islamic culture, those involved with Taqwacore have utilized punk rock ethos and attitudes as a form of resistance and reconciliation with both and in the process have created a unique identity and community.

Islamic culture and U.S. culture are the two most discussed here, but also, there is an intersection of a global culture and a local culture. In contrast to some of the recent post-subcultural analyses that are rooted in the post-modern view that identities are fluid and fleeting and that individuals hold multiple identities at the same time without an authentic investment, the two identities that Taqwacore encompasses are both meaningful and authentic. An important focus of the CCCS researchers was on identity and choice and they argued that subcultural attachment does not necessarily emerge out of necessity or circumstance. Instead, they argue that individuals choose membership in a subculture and their level of identification with or attachment to the subculture can vary (Irwin, 1970/2005).

In fact, Wood (2003) argued that subculture members can and do incorporate competing identities. In his analysis of the straightedge subculture, Wood argued that

despite the collective identity of the subculture, individuals internalized and emphasized these shared values very differently. Wood explained this variability by viewing subcultural affiliation as a process of identity salience, arguing that at different times in an individual's life particular aspects of a subcultural identity may be more salient than at other times. These observations help explain the variability of those involved with Taqwacore or why some individuals are Muslim, some are not, some are more involved than others, and the variety of involvement. Wood's explanation also sheds some light on to the very open attitude of Taqwacore, its subjectivity, and the "anyone can do it" attitude. Varying identity salience allows those involved to determine what being involved with Taqwacore means to them and what role it plays in their life.

Whereas Hebdige (1979/2004) found the hybridity of reggae and rock within punk connected on a structural level (through their connections to the working class), Taqwacore in its melding of identities, has happened on a different level. While not class based and not an alternative means to achieve social goals, Taqwacore has simultaneously resisted and grasped onto the two cultural spaces in which they exist. In doing so, they have forged a new cultural space, much like earlier punk in their synthesis of various subcultures, that not only shocks, but resists and rebels, and has built a community of like-minded individuals, who have fostered stronger individual identities and found resolution in who they are and where they stand.

Similar also to punk's emergence in the 1970s, the Taqwacores have emerged during a time of crisis in U.S. history, amidst sudden changes, the post 9/11 climate of fear, and the War on Terror. Unlike the earlier punks, however, the Taqwacores are in the crosshairs of this crisis, as Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, or South Asian Americans living in the United States after 9/11.

CHAPTER IX

DISCUSSION

The initial question that guided this project was how the individuals involved with Taqwacore maintain membership in the two seemingly paradoxical worlds of Islam and punk rock and how this identity management occurs in everyday life. I explored the social context in the United States that facilitated Taqwacore's emergence as a way to examine how these two identities are resolved or maintained. It became clear that the punk rock identity that I initially conceptualized as conflicting with an Islamic identity was in fact not contradictory, but rather served as a mediator in a different identity conflict between the United States and Islam. Importantly, I have conceptualized this tension resulting from a socially constructed incompatibility between Islam and the United States and not as a clash of cultures or civilizations. Examining and understanding Taqwacore on an individual level contributed to this understanding. This historical tradition in the United States of defining itself in opposition to an Other, compounded by 9/11, served as the foundations for this social construction. The people I interviewed are those who have not only been caught in this conflict between the United States and Islam, but also have resisted these incompatibilities and developed a meaningful community based in punk rock, through which they have negotiated or mediated this conflict that manifested itself on a personal level.

To examine how the people involved with Taqwacore maintain or resolve these two identities, I examined how the United States social context has facilitated Taqwacore's emergence. In examining the identity conflict that was articulated by my interviewees (between U.S. and Islam), it became clear that the U.S. social context has been crucial or essential for Taqwacore's emergence. Not only has the social context in the United States created the underlying conflicts and motivations for Taqwacore, but also has provided the means to resolve this conflict for certain individuals. Taqwacore has done this by creating a new social and symbolic space, a punk rock subculture that serves as an expression of frustration, resistance, community, and identity development.

The social and political context in the U.S. has facilitated Taqwacore's emergence in creating and perpetuating the underlying motivations and frustrations for the individuals involved. Out of these frustrations and motivations, a need for a community—both as a form of friendship and as a symbolic space—emerged. Finally, the medium of resistance to these frustrations, means of community development, and mediator between this identity conflict has occurred through the creation of a punk rock subculture.

The dual frustration experienced by those I interviewed is specific to the United States social and political context. While much of the immediately influential social and political situations for Taqwacore's emergence occurred after 9/11, as I argued earlier, the historical basis within the United States precluded these situations. There has been a

historical trend of the United States defining itself in opposition to an Other.

Nonetheless, 9/11 did increase the essentialized identity construction of Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, and Middle Easterners. This identity construction was rooted in the association of these groups of people with terrorism and violence. In addition, these groups were constructed as the antithesis of the United States.

The continued perception of East vs. West compounded by the social labeling of certain groups as a deviant Other enforced or created the perception of a cultural conflict within the United States. As The Chicago School posited, at a certain level, those in power define legitimate behavior, values, and goals. Because certain majority groups define this legitimacy, other groups (minorities) are inherently defined as illegitimate. The Chicago School specifically looked at delinquency as a result of differing conceptualizations of legitimacy between groups of individuals and those in power and I see a connection between the power of social labeling or social construction and Taqwacore. For those involved with Taqwacore, a part of their identities has been labeled deviant within United States society. The Chicago School viewed subcultures as emerging from this social tension as individuals developed alternative means and validated behaviors, values, and goals within the subcultural community. The tension or strain that has influenced Taqwacore's emergence is the result of the constructed cultural conflict that has manifested individually as an identity conflict, need for a community, and expression of resistance.

Defining the United States and Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian as mutually exclusive cultures and identities influenced the need for a community for certain individuals. This socially and symbolically constructed dichotomy did not allow space for the existence of individuals who do not fit into one of these categories.

Expressed through feelings of not belonging or alienation, the essential need for social support, a network of friends and colleagues, and the need for a social space served as motivations for Taqwacore's emergence. Through the development of a community, the individuals involved with Taqwacore have created a new social and symbolic space that functions as a site for identity development and the expression of resistance. Further, the development of this punk rock music community has helped these individuals mediate the constructed conflict between these two identities.

The need for a community not only created a social space for these individuals to express frustrations and resistance, but also served as a site for identity development. Crucial for the construction of communities is the existence or creation of symbolic boundaries. Not only do these boundaries define and distinguish the community itself, but also the members of the community define and distinguish themselves and their identities via these boundaries. It is through the development or emergence of Taqwacore that these individuals have been able to redefine their symbolic boundaries. The result has been an increased sense of self-confidence and self-acceptance.

A major part of the ability to restructure these symbolic boundaries and mediate these two identities has been the aspects of resistance and the appropriation of a punk rock subculture. These aspects of resistance to the socially constructed dichotomy of the United States and Islam are closely connected to individual identity development. The aspects of punk rock within Taqwacore have served a mediating role in resisting and resolving the personal identity conflicts resulting from this dual frustration. Ultimately, in developing a punk rock music community, Taqwacore has expressed this dual frustration, aided in individual identity development, and served as a mediator between these two socially constructed identities.

Hebdige (1979/2004) noted the “social crisis” that occurred and the “apocalyptic” social climate at the time of punk’s initial emergence. The post 9/11 context in the United States is, perhaps, a time of social crisis and apocalypse in the United States for Muslim, Arab, South Asian, or Middle Eastern Americans. Emerging out of social crisis, punk was a contradiction. Taqwacore has continued the traditions of punk rock in its contradiction, amalgamation, and re-appropriation.

Similar to the origins of punk rock, Taqwacore combines different elements and influences to create a unique subculture. In creating a new space, out of the need for a place to belong, Taqwacore has drawn from both cultures or identities and developed a unique space or identity. While Taqwacore is not strictly a stylistic rebellion as CCCS observed of early punk rock, it is similar to the earlier subcultures in its re-appropriation

of signs and symbols. Similar to the early punk subcultures' re-appropriation of everyday items with vastly different and shocking meanings, Taqwacore has re-appropriated Islamic and U.S. signs and symbols. As early punk rock subcultures re-appropriated everyday items, such as the safety pin, Taqwacore has re-appropriated everyday items from Islam, such as the burqa. Also, in re-appropriating the familiarity of punk rock within an Islamic, Arab, South Asian, or Middle Eastern context, localized to the social, political, and religious issues they face, individuals involved with Taqwacore have created a punk subculture in the traditional sense of re-appropriating symbols and signs and investing them with very different meanings. An interesting example of this re-appropriation, of both everyday items and punk rock, is an image used in both the novel and in a song by The Kominas of a woman wearing a burqa covered in patches. This image combines an everyday item of Islam with a traditional punk clothing style and means of expression.

The United States social context has not just facilitated Taqwacore's emergence, but also perhaps made Taqwacore's emergence inevitable. The social, cultural, and political context of the United States has been responsible for providing, most importantly, the underlying motivations for Taqwacore's emergence, the medium of expression for Taqwacore, and the ability for Taqwacore to emerge as a coherent subculture. Ultimately, the United States social context created the need for a subculture or a community such as Taqwacore in perpetuating these mutually exclusive identity and

cultural categories. As individuals who do not fit exclusively in one category or the other, the individuals involved with Taqwacore have resisted these socially constructed boundaries and developed a new social space that allows them to be contradictory, an amalgamation, and most importantly allows them the subjectivity to define their own identity and subculture.

In many ways, the construction of Taqwacore as a social space and a symbolic community functions in similar ways to the earlier subcultures that the Chicago School and the CCCS studied. Taqwacore is an alternative construction for the individuals involved, not necessarily of goals or means to achieve socially prescribed goals, but rather is an alternative identity construction. The legitimate identities afforded to these individuals, as Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, or Middle Eastern Americans are 1) constructed as incompatible with a U.S. identity, and 2) are labeled or constructed as socially deviant. Taqwacore has thus resisted the deviant and essentialized identities and the incompatibility of these two identities by creating a symbolic community and redefining the symbolic boundaries around their individual and collective identities. Also, as a symbolic community, and specifically utilizing punk rock has allowed these individuals to re-appropriate signs and symbols and invest them with localized and personal meanings. Utilizing a punk rock subculture or community as a mediator between these identity constructions, Taqwacore has simultaneously resisted and re-appropriated aspects of their identities.

Contributions

This study has contributed to the theoretical literature on subcultures and communities, to the descriptive literature on punk rock, and to the literature on subcultures by combining or utilizing theories from The Chicago School and The CCCS. Adding to the literature on community, this study illustrates the connection between individual identity development and community development. This study also contributes to and extends previous studies on punk rock subcultures, particularly recent studies that have examined punk rock subcultures in non-Western contexts and the involvement of minorities in punk rock subcultures. The main contribution of this study, however, is to demonstrate how membership in music communities or subcultures can mediate or resolve identity conflicts.

This study has contributed to the literature on subcultures in that it is based on the two major theoretical views of subcultures. This study examines Taqwacore as emerging from a social tension or strain, as the Chicago School posited, yet accounts for non-delinquent or criminal subcultures. This study also draws on the CCCS and specifically studies on punk rock. The symbolic resistance and re-appropriation Taqwacore engages in add to or extend these previous subcultural studies. Further, the re-appropriation that Taqwacore engages in is similar to many of the current subcultural studies that have examined subcultures as appropriating a global concept (e.g., punk rock) on a localized level. Overall, this analysis of Taqwacore illustrates that The Chicago School and the

CCCS, as well as current emerging theories of subcultures, are important theoretical frameworks for studying current subcultures.

This study also extends the literature on communities, by supporting the symbolic construction of communities. As a symbolic community, the individuals involved with Taqwacore have resisted and restructured the symbolic boundaries placed on them by U.S. society. In doing so, the individuals involved with Taqwacore have developed their individual identities, further supporting the literature on community development and individual identity.

This study also adds to the literature on punk rock by being one of the few studies about minorities' involvement in punk rock in the United States. Based on traditional conceptualizations of punk rock, this study illustrates how punk rock as a global culture and its ethos, attitudes, and traditions continue to be re-appropriated within different contexts. It also supports some of the current studies on punk rock subcultures that argue that it is at the local level of appropriation that punk rock gains meaning and resistance for its members. This study contributes to the ongoing studies of punk rock and illustrates how individuals utilize punk rock as a means of meaningful resistance.

Most importantly, this study proposes that identification with a music community can serve as a mediator or resolution of an identity conflict. Specifically, Taqwacore, as a punk rock subculture and music community, has served for those involved as a mediator between two socially constructed identities. Whereas I initially viewed this

identity conflict as occurring between the punk rock and Islamic aspects of these individuals' identities, the real conflict that was articulated by those I interviewed was between the U.S. and Islamic identity constructions. Taqwacore has thus served as a mediator between these two identities that have been constructed separately and as mutually exclusive. As a form of identity management, Taqwacore has allowed these individuals to come to their own conclusions and decisions about what their involvement in Taqwacore means to them. How these individuals negotiate two seemingly different or paradoxical identities is answered through the development of a punk rock music community. The punk rock identity is not one of the identities in conflict rather it is the form of resolution between the socially constructed conflict between Islam and the U.S. identities. This study extends past studies of punk rock and subcultures by arguing that in this instance punk rock does not merely act as a means of resistance or rebellion, but as a means of identity management and mediation.

Future Directions

Future studies can build on this one in a variety of ways. First, my analysis and discussion of Taqwacore relied on interviews with five individuals. While these individuals range in level of involvement with Taqwacore and are involved in a variety of ways, this is still a limited number of interviews. Further, as the literature on community development argues, individuals' interpretations of and motivations for associating with a community can vary, and I would expect that most of the individuals involved with

Taqwacore have unique experiences. The level of involvement and salience of involvement varies among members, thus, future studies should include interviews with a larger number of participants. All of the individuals I interviewed are male and future studies should include interviews with and perspectives of the women involved with Taqwacore. Additionally, while I have pointed out that not all of the individuals involved with Taqwacore are Muslim, Arab, South Asian, or Middle Eastern, the individuals I interviewed came from Muslim backgrounds. Thus, the data for this thesis revolves around these individuals' personal experiences as Muslim Americans, which shaped my analysis and speculation on identity conflict.

Taqwacore is still emerging as a subculture and how or if the community will grow and develop remains to be seen. Because Taqwacore is a newly emerging subculture, the number of people involved is limited and the exact meanings of Taqwacore are still negotiable. Exploring Taqwacore during its emergence is also a strength of this study, as this preliminary study will allow future studies to compare and track the changes and life of Taqwacore over time.

My discussions and comparisons of Taqwacore to punk and heavy metal subcultures in Muslim countries are quite limited. Future studies should engage in more in-depth comparisons of how each music community or subculture functions for its members and compare across nations or regions the underlying social and religious contexts. It would be interesting to compare the social and political contexts in which

these subcultures have emerged to find common and disparate motivations and means of expression.

Concluding Thoughts

This project is a preliminary analysis of an emerging subculture in the United States based on interviews with individuals directly involved in the subculture. While not all of the individuals involved with Taqwacore are Muslim, Arab, South Asian, or Middle Eastern, the hope in doing this study is to gain an understanding of an identity conflict experienced by certain individuals in the United States. As this study has shown, membership in a music community can help individuals express resistance to social constructions, make social or political statements, resolve personal identity conflicts, and develop a community. The hope is that in studying such communities or subcultures, a broader understanding of this constructed conflict and an understanding of music communities and subcultures in relation to identity conflict and resolution will emerge.

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Appendix A.

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Appendix B.

Tables

Table 1

Description of Taqwacore Bands

Band	Description
Al-Thawra	Taqwacore band from Chicago that describes their music and sound as “doom-crust punk” or metal. Members include Marwan, Mario, and Micah. “Al-Thawra” translates to “The Revolution.”
Diacritical	Taqwacore band from Washington, D.C. started by Omar Waqar. Omar is currently involved in a new band, Sarmust.
The Kominas	Taqwacore band from Boston, MA. Members include Basim Usmani, Shahjehan Khan, Arjun, and Imran. “The Kominas” translates to “The Bastards”. The Kominas have received the most media attention of all the Taqwacore bands.

Table 1 Continued

Secret Trial Five	All female Taqwacore band from Vancouver, Canada. Secret Trial Five was especially influenced by The Kominas to start a Taqwacore band.
Vote Hezbollah	Taqwacore band from San Antonio, TX, that took its name directly from one of the bands in the novel, <i>The Taqwacores</i> . Vote Hezbollah turned the poem that appears on one of the introductory pages of the novel, entitled “Muhammad was a Punk Rocker” into a song.

Table 2

Descriptions of Interviewees

Person	Description
Toufic El Rassi	<p>31-year-old Lebanese American who grew up in Chicago. His family moved to the United States when he was very young.</p> <p>Toufic does consider himself a Taqwacore and is a big supporter of Taqwacore. Toufic recently published a graphic novel, <i>Arab in America</i>, based on his personal experiences growing up in the United States as an Arab American. Toufic is not a practicing Muslim.</p>
Marwan Kamel	<p>23 year old who was born and raised in Chicago, IL. He is the founding member of Al-Thawra and says he was beginning to mix Arabic sounds with heavy metal before he found out about Taqwacore. His father is Syrian and his mother is white. Marwan did not grow up in a religiously strict or active family.</p>
Shahjehan Khan	<p>25-year-old guitar player for The Kominas. He was born and raised in the suburbs of Boston. His parents are Pakistani immigrants and</p>

Table 2 Continued

	<p>Shahjehan has visited and worked in Pakistan recently (within the past 3 years). He and Basim have known each other since they were teenagers, although did not form a strong friendship until they both discovered Taqwacore.</p>
Basim Usmani	<p>25-year-old bass player and singer for The Kominas. He was born in New York City and moved to Lahore, Pakistan when he was 10 years old. He returned to the United States when he was 15, although he has spent extended periods of time in Pakistan working as a journalist. His parents are both Pakistani immigrants and religious, although Basim is atheist.</p>
Eyad Zahra	<p>26-year-old filmmaker living in Los Angeles, CA. Eyad is a Muslim American who grew up in Cleveland, OH. He is currently working on the film version of the novel, for which he wrote the screenplay and is the director. Eyad does not specifically consider himself a Taqwacore, because he claims it would create a definition or standard of Taqwacore and that Taqwacore is indefinable, although he is a big supporter of and identifies with Taqwacore.</p>